

She's the  
**Cutest**..  
But We're  
Just  
Friends!

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## Kai Nakamura

A second-year in high school.  
A boy who pursues his many hobbies with the utmost of passion.  
He met Jun just after his high school's entrance ceremony, and since their hobbies lined up perfectly, she became his best friend.

## Jun Miyakawa

A second-year in high school.  
A popular student said to be the prettiest girl in her grade.  
Kai's girl friend from heaven who can connect with him across a wide variety of genres.



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## Kotobuki Hotei

- A first-year in high school.  
A girl friend of Kai's from work.  
A newbie with a devilish smile to hide her crumbling self-confidence.  
Learning the ropes of customer service from Kai.



## Reina Fujisawa

- A second-year in high school.  
A friend of Jun's who's said to be the prettiest woman in her grade.  
Does she see something in Kai?



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## Prologue

The high school Kai Nakamura enrolled in, Asagi High, was a private school that prided itself on its relaxed environment. Students were free to use not just their cell phones, but also their gaming consoles as long as they weren't in class.

"Seriously?! We can play video games at school?!"

Kai, a hardcore otaku, didn't have his hopes up for much when he heard this. But then—

After the entrance ceremony ended, it was time for Kai and the other new students to relocate to their respective classrooms and wait for their very first homeroom period to begin.

"Morning! I'm Jun Miyakawa." The girl who took the seat next to Kai spoke to him, completely out of the blue.

"G-Good m-morning, I'm K-K-Kai Nakamura," Kai said in a panic as he introduced himself back.

He wasn't a bad communicator or anything. He could talk to girls just fine (although coming up with suave, engaging things to talk about was out of the question!). Nevertheless, it was painstakingly obvious why he behaved this way.

She was unbelievably hot. Something about her almond-shaped eyes gave her a mischievous air, making him profoundly aware of her cheerful charm. Only a girl who was not quite a child, but not quite an adult could project that. Her nose was well defined, and her lips were a soft, petal pink. Despite her natural makeup, she was so good-looking it wouldn't have been strange at all to see her on the cover of a teen magazine.

Jun's light-brown hair was tied back into a single ponytail, which cascaded onto her shoulders. She didn't have a single split end. Her hair was so soft and shiny, it was almost like the spring sunlight was only shining into the classroom to add to her allure. Kai knew how much work it took to keep her hair in this condition because of all the whining his sister did about it at home.

The real pièce de résistance was her mind-blowingly incredible bust. It was so voluptuous that any boy his age would find his eyes glued to it.





"You can call me Jun! Nice to meet you, neighbor," she said, pointing to herself with an absolutely stunning smile on her face.

That's right, stunning. He didn't get the sense that she was trying to butter him up as was typical of some girls. Such a breath of fresh air.

"Y-You can call me Kai, then," he said.

"Will do, Kai!"

*Wow, she said my name!* This surprised him a bit, knocking the air from his chest. Not that there was anything uncomfortable about it. On the contrary, he felt happy and flattered that a pretty girl would talk to him like they were good friends already. *I'm SO glad I came to this school...* he thought. His only motivation to apply was video games. Who knew he'd get to be desk neighbors with a girl as cute and friendly as Jun because of it?!

As he relished his stroke of good luck, Jun began to open her bookbag next to him. It was a very girly bag, covered in mascot character accessories. *I bet she's going to pull makeup tools out of it,* he figured, only to be surprised yet again.

Jun swiftly but triumphantly pulled out a Switch!

"I've been WAITING for this!" was all she said before excitedly and unabashedly starting to play.

*Huh? HUH?* Kai couldn't keep himself from ogling. Sure, girls who play video games really weren't that rare nowadays. That said, did she *really* bring video games with her to the first day of school? And start playing as soon as the entrance ceremony ended? Even though they had homeroom right after? That was *way* too bold, even for a school that let students play video games!

She must have felt Kai's gaze on her.

"Curious?" Jun asked without looking up from her screen.

"Oh... U-Uh, yeah. What're you playing?"

*"Breath of the Wild!"*

"Oh, *Zelda*? Nice!" Kai turned to the seat next to him and leaned forward. Now that he was closer, he tried to look at her screen. His interest as an otaku beat out any timidness he felt about scooting so close to a pretty girl he'd just met.

Everyone was still talking about the game even though it had been out for roughly a year. He wanted it too, but as someone who carefully managed his meager allowance, he'd ended up putting it on the backburner. There were too many video games, manga, and light novels he wanted.

Kai watched from the side, amused, as Jun happily chucked what looked like a bomb into a lake and caught the fish that floated to the surface (what an awful way to fish!).

"Wanna give it a try, Kai?" Jun asked.

"Mm... Thanks, but I'm good."

"You sure? No need to be shy about it."

"I'm not," he responded. Something action-y like *Mario Kart* or *Smash Bros.* with short rounds was one thing, but *BotW* was the type of game you hunkered down to play. He didn't want to just skim it. Kai wanted to save enjoying the game for when he eventually bought and played it himself, so he could relish the thrill on a deeper level!

...was the gist of what he started ranting and raving about. After unintentionally rattling off an otaku saga, Kai felt a twinge of regret. *That was probably a turn-off since we just met...*

But then Jun replied, "I get it! You're right; you oughta be hands off. My bad!" She looked up from her game at him and giggled. Then she flashed another winning smile at him. Between admiring her attractiveness and being shook that a girl understood his diehard gamer attitude, Kai was frantic.

"Besides," he stated, still all fired up. "I'm already covered." Kai pulled his own Switch out of his bookbag.

"Haha ♪ Do you normally bring that with you to the first day of school?"

"Who says you're talking to somebody 'normal'?" he quipped back while booting up his Switch. Kai started playing *Monster Hunter*, thinking that for a moment there, they sort of felt like old friends.

Kai and Jun sat adjacent to each other, both engrossed in their games. As a result, neither of them realized: given the day and time they'd both started playing their games out of the blue, a small crowd had formed around the two of them. People gathered around with looks on their faces that said, "What are they doing...?"

Since Jun's appearance made her especially stand out, plenty of guys and girls wanted to talk to her. The vibe made them hesitate about approaching her, however. The only people Kai and Jun spoke at ease with while playing, were each other. In a way, they'd essentially created their own little world. This quickly produced an atmosphere no one else felt they could set foot into.

An average Joe, a super-rad girl... From the outside, the two of them seemed to be from completely different worlds. But one hobby—video games—served as a go-between!

"Is that *Generations Ultimate*? You doing some Thunderlord hunting?" Jun asked while playing *BotW*.

"You can never have enough leg armor," Kai replied while playing *MH*. He kept his mouth shut about wanting the armor because of the sexy design, for obvious reasons.

"Didn't a new *MH* game come out, though? Isn't that one old?"

"I mean, yeah, they did release *World*," he responded. *GU* was just the only title he could play on the Switch, which was portable. He knew full well that he was playing an old series. "I'll play *MHW* when I get back home."

"You have it?!" Jun asked excitedly, looking up from her screen again.

"Well, I saved up my allowance for it," he replied. The PS4 itself was expensive. Plus, if anything, you could say that was the biggest reason why he put off buying *BotW*.

"That sounds awesome..." she sighed.

"You don't... you don't have it, Jun?" For a second he wasn't sure whether to call her by name too, but in the end he opted to follow her lead.

Jun didn't seem to notice Kai's mild conflict over this, much less care. "There've been ALL these manga, CDs, lipsticks, and sandals I want coming out lately~"

"O-Oh yeah...?" he stammered. All the otaku girls he'd ever met were either the posh, "*I read manga, but fashion is my top priority!*" type, or the "*I love anime! Fashion comes second!*" type. This was the first time he'd ever met a girl like Jun, who didn't seem to want to give up either. Or perhaps, it was his first time meeting a girl who was interested in a blood-tingling game like *MH*. He couldn't help but grow even more interested in her.

Jun continued in a passionate tone, "Isn't the gameplay also super different in *MHW*? As a longtime player, I'm kinda nervous that it won't feel like previous entries, you know? So I kind of wanna just wait and see?"

He knew *exactly* what she meant. That was actually the reason he waffled on buying it himself. Kai paused his game, turned toward Jun and emphatically said, "It's faithful to the gameplay up to now, *and* the new gameplay elements are interesting!" As both an *MH* lover and someone who was always a bit ahead of the curve, he couldn't stop himself from treading into new, joyous territory.

"That sounds nice~" Jun said, writhing out of what seemed to be sincere jealousy. Her huge boobs jiggled.

"...Wanna give it a try?"

"Yes!!!" she exclaimed immediately in response to his timidly posed question. Kai, emboldened by her behavior, resolved himself.

"A-Alright, wanna come over to my house?"

He asked out loud, his voice shaking but otherwise clear. Would it shock her, being so sudden? Or would she laugh and say that she'd never go over to the house of some guy she barely even knew? Would she coldly turn him down?

There was no need for him to worry.

"Sure!"

Because—sure enough—Jun flashed him a boyish grin, and answered without missing a single beat.



"I didn't think you'd actually come back then. For real," Kai muttered, violently mashing his Joy-Con.

On the right side of the split screen, Kai's player character Morton hugged the inside of the track in Bone-Dry Dunes with a Mushroom Dash.

"Yeah, it was a bit much for you to invite me over," Jun said, pursing her lips in a cute way as she fought desperately with her own Joy-Con. The character she was controlling on the left side of the screen, Isabelle, left Morton (and the shortcut Kai had taken) in the dust.

It was after school. They were in Kai's room on the second floor of his house. His nine-square-meter room was furnished with a study desk, bookshelf, and TV, among other things. Kai was the type of guy who only put up a single poster—his absolute favorite at the moment—despite how bare it looked. Right now, it was a *Goblin Slayer* poster drawn by Noboru Kannatsuki that adorned his ceiling... depicting the four heroines from the book clad in bright bikinis. How naughty. He wanted anime figurines, but they were out of reach for a high schooler like himself.

Kai sat on his bed in his incredibly average otaku lair with a not-so-average hot girl, playing *Mario Kart*.

He and Jun played video games, took turns reading manga, and watched anime they'd DVR'd until late at night. Sometimes they would bicker over having different favorite characters, but they had essentially the same taste in everything. Kai had never gotten along with someone this well before.

She was the very first female friend he'd ever had. No, she was his *best* friend.

He'd leave it up to somebody else to decide whether or not this was normal! Either way, ever since then, Jun would go over to Kai's place to hang out about five times a week.

You heard that right—ever since. A year had passed since he had met Jun. The two of them advanced to their second year of high school and ended up in the same class yet again. Today was the first day of school.

"A lot's happened this year, now that I think about it," Kai commented.

"Nuh-uh! All we did was hang out every day." So began their aimless conversation, as they played *MK*.

"You really wanted to play *MHW* that bad back then, Jun?"

"Yeah, I did!" Jun replied.

"You weren't scared of going over to the house of a guy you barely knew?"

"I figured your parents would be there, so I didn't mind," she shrugged.

"What would you have done if I was obviously living on my own in an apartment or something?" Kai asked her.

"I woulda made up an excuse in the doorway and turned right back around."

"Makes sense."

"I mean, I always have to be on guard looking like *this*. Y'know?" Jun said in a completely deadpan manner as she pressed the buttons on her Joy-Con.

"Says the person who's right about to lose the lead to me and Morton!"

"I wasn't talking about the game just now, though!" Jun cried. Kai looked at her from the corner of his eye and shot her a triumphant look. Then she continued, "Real high-and-mighty talk for a guy who's been sneaking peeks at my bare legs!"

Jun's teasing made him glare. It was no use, though. Jun was sitting cross-legged next to him on the bed. Sitting in that position meant she could focus on gaming, but... he *did* have a full view of her bare legs because of how short her skirt was, not to mention some white fabric that should've stayed hidden saying hello.

"Hey, your panties are sticking out!"

"Got you now, Kai!" Jun couldn't care less about the warning he'd given her. The game had her undivided attention. Her character Isabelle flipped Morton on his back and callously slid past the goal line.

"Yaaay, I won! I won!" she cheered.

"That was DIRTY!!!"

"A win's a win! That's on YOU for being a dirty pervert and peeping at my panties!" Jun said, casually fixing her skirt. "Kai, you horndog!"

Despite flashing him an evil grin to tease him for his boyish innocence, Jun's cheeks were a bit red. In other words, she was clearly hiding her embarrassment. *What about having your guard up now?* Kai thought to himself.

In the beginning, Jun refrained from being on the bed, would sit properly with her legs out to the side, and was careful to move and position herself to keep her panties from showing. But within a month, she was comfortable being completely open and vulnerable in Kai's room. He often ignored it because it was far more embarrassing for him to point it out each and every time!

"Anyways, let's do another, Jun," Kai gruffly proposed to diffuse the awkward vibe.

"I'm good. I already beat you at *MK* anyway."

"You just gonna quit while you're ahead?!"

"Precisely," she said.

"Oh, come on, beat me fair and square!"

"I wanna play *MHW* instead since you brought it up! It's been too long," said Jun. Without bothering to get his approval, she assertively put her Joy-Con back on the Switch and turned the PS4 on.

"...Guess that leaves me no choice." Kai reluctantly returned his Joy-Con to the console and started up a *different* PS4.

Yup—can you believe it?

Jun brought her own TV and PS4 to play on once she started spending all her time in his room. She'd even hijacked the Wi-Fi and was connected to the internet. Kai's already small room felt even more confined as a result... That was the reason why they had two PS4s in his room.

"So Jun, what're we hunting for?" Kai asked her.

"Anything, as long as it's a Tempered Elder Dragon."



"Ugh, collect the tracks on your own then..."

"Aw, don't say that. Humor me~ Lemme see just how much of a breadwinner you can be~" She negotiated with him while waiting for the game to finish booting up. As she did, they both heard Kai's mother's voice from the first floor.

"Juuuun! Are you having dinner with us tonight?"

"Yes, pleeease! Thaaank you, Mother!" Jun shouted genially in response.

"Who are *you* calling 'Mother'...?" Normally she called her "ma'am."

"What can I say, Kai? Every single time you call a woman 'ma'am,' they get another day older."

"Ma'am, ma'am, ma'am."

"Gimme my three days back!"

"'Mother' just sounds weird, though."

"Alright, how about I call her 'Noriko'?"

"STOP." It just felt wrong for a friend his age to be calling his mom by her first name.

"It's *fine*! It's not like I'm gonna steal your mom, Kai. There, there," Jun teased, giggling.

"I'm not worried about that. It just feels like you'll actually be part of the family before long..." Kai said, being half truthful.

"That would be nice!" Jun chirped. "Wow, Noriko, you're such a good cook~"

"Stop calling her 'Noriko'..." Kai grumbled, his PS4 controller at the ready. The only drawback to this masterpiece of a console was that it took a while to start up. Eventually, it displayed the start screen on his TV.

Then, he and Jun were off to the New World to play.

This was Kai's daily life with his female friend, Jun. He wished it could last forever. He never stopped wishing for that all throughout his high school career.

## Episode 001 - My Name, and Jun's Real Name, Are Both Ridiculous

Kai and Jun were two otaku peas in a pod, with many of the same interests. They also had a few complexes in common.

Jun was the first to realize this. It happened a year ago on the day of the entrance ceremony. This is the story of the very first time Jun, enticed by *MHW*, came over to Kai's house to hang out.

"I picked Asagi because I heard they didn't care if you played video games or read manga at school," said Jun.

"Me too, me too!"

They were on the way back to Kai's house. Kai walked next to Jun, down a public road that ran through a residential area.

"At my middle school, they didn't even let you bring your *cell phone*!"

"Same, same! Like, who even cares as long as you're not using it in class?"

"Right?! It made it really hard to get in touch with my mom whenever something happened. It sucked," said Jun.

"That's so behind the times," Kai agreed. "I remember being even more pissed when I read something online saying more and more schools are letting students have their phones on them."

"On the other hand, isn't it crazy that Asagi lets us bring our Switches to class too?"

"Yeah!"

"*I didn't fully believe it,*" Jun elaborated. "*I was like, 'The teachers really won't confiscate them? If they took my Switch, I'd straight-up die.'*"

"I feel that. I was honestly pretty nervous up until homeroom started."

"I even nailed a sweet drift in Koopa Castle in front of the teacher, and they just let it slide!"

"I hunted two Rathalos in class, and they didn't get mad!"

"It was freaking *awesome*! WAY more exciting than playing at home!!"

"I feel free... or should I say, *liberated* as hell after being repressed all through middle school. I'm honestly impressed. Like, '*Wow, is this what it's like being in high school?*' I feel like I'm one step closer to being an adult."

"Exactly! That's exactly it, Kai! You said it perfectly!"

"O-Oh yeah?" he asked.

Jun, deeply moved, suddenly grabbed Kai's left arm and shook it like she was trying to yank his arm off. Even this mild bit of physical intimacy was a huge shock to an adolescent virgin like Kai. Not to mention just how gorgeous Jun was. *It almost looks like we've been walking arm in arm...*! he thought to himself, heart pounding wildly. No one was there to burst his bubble and tell him, "No, not really."

Afterwards, Jun composed herself and said, "But we should probably dial it back after tomorrow..."

"Yeah, I feel kinda bad..." Kai admitted. "Everyone was sorta put off by it." If they kept that up tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow, they'd end up isolated from the rest of their new class. They wouldn't make any friends. *Definitely no bueno...*

He'd never been a loner by nature. He'd always had good friends, even before high school. Of course, he didn't really feel the need to make a ton of friends in high school either. He wanted to be friends with people he got along with, people who shared his interests.

As those thoughts were running through his mind, Jun asked him, "But I *did* make one friend right off the bat because of that, right?"

She said this while looking into his face, walking right beside him. A bit embarrassed, she tried to play it off with an impish grin and said it teasingly. But she was still holding onto Kai's arm the entire time.

"W-Well, true that." Kai was too embarrassed to come up with a slick response. He looked off in the other direction, but didn't try to shake himself free from Jun's tight grip.

Then, thanks to Jun, he was able to confidently announce to his family:

"I'm hooome! I brought a **friend**."

He succeeded in scaring the crap out of his mother, who poked her head out of the kitchen and said, "WOW... you have a friend this cute?!"

*I'm more shocked than anybody here*, he thought. He couldn't help but find it a bit humorous.



Kai had her wait a little bit while he cleaned up his mess, then invited her up to his room on the second floor.

"Oh!" she exclaimed as she took a step inside.

This startled Kai. He *thought* he'd hidden everything he didn't want a girl to find. Did he miss something? "Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What's up?" he asked suspiciously.

Jun then pointed up at the wall scroll on his ceiling and happily noted, "I've seen that anime too!"

*So she DIDN'T find the bad stuff...* Kai heaved a sigh of relief. Then, he stared at the ceiling along with Jun. He had a *The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!* scroll up then, back when the anime had just finished airing.

"The art style is pretty different from the anime, though. Is this what it was based on?" she asked.

"Yup," he nodded. "It was a bonus that came with volume 7."

It was an illustration of all five girls drawn by the legendary Shirabi. Veeery moe. The age of every single one of the pajama-clad heroines was in the single digits... AKA loli characters. Others might worry about a girl

seeing something like this, but Kai was already completely numb to it. He was an otaku.

Jun didn't seem to think anything of it either. In fact, she agreed: "Cute!" She was an otaku too.

"By the way, which team are YOU on, Kai?"

"Which 'team'?" he asked.

Her question made a bolt of lightning flash across the back of his mind. You'd think she was asking which character was his favorite, if she was looking at a picture of the five characters and asking a question. But Jun intentionally phrased it differently, hiding her actual intent. She was asking which of the double heroines named Ai he liked better, which the author Shiro Shiratori created as foils: Ai Hinatsuru or Ai Yashajin!

Kai accurately grasped the finer points and context, and read between the lines of her question. "I'm Team Ten," he answered confidently, referring to Ai Yashajin. This all happened in 0.8 seconds—lightning speed!

"I know, right?! I'm Team Ten too~"

"She has the most mature way of thinking even though she's still just a kid. I thought the parts where *she's* the one nitpicking the master were especially interesting. I wanna wife her. She can be kind of hopeless, but it really gets me *right* in the heart when she shows her weak side, like, clinging to Yaichi, I wanna wi—" As he gushed, overjoyed at having found a kindred spirit, he suddenly came back to his senses.

*Yeesh, I blurted out some really gross things just now, didn't I?! His regret and anxiousness over saying something he shouldn't have around a girl made his heart thump wildly in his chest. He broke out in a cold sweat. This was not the time and place to be struck through the heart by Ten's cuteness. However—*

"I totally know what you mean! I just *can't* when she refuses to ask for help right away~ She only does that because deep down she's just a girl who wants to be recognized by the one she loves, and it makes me SOOO weepy~" Jun beamed as she nerded out, not disgusted in the slightest.

He suddenly wanted to high-five her. With the care only a virgin would bother with, Kai gingerly gave her a high-five so he wouldn't hurt a girl. Though they only touched for a split second, Kai noticed Jun's palm was silky smooth. He stared at his palm and basked in the afterglow without a second thought.

Then, Jun drifted over to his bookshelf. "Do you mind if I take a look?" she asked.

"...Yeah, of course," Kai consented with hesitation.

Most of his collection wasn't embarrassing for her to see, but—in the very middle—sat *World's End Harem* and *How to Build a Dungeon: Book of the Demon King*, neither of which were 18+ but were *definitely* erotic. He'd drop dead if a girl found them. His life would be OVER.

*Please don't find them...! he prayed.*

That very moment, he heard Jun let out a surprised “Ohhh!” and felt like his heart would leap out of his chest. “Wh-Wh-Wh-What’s up?” he asked yet again, in a very suspicious manner.

Jun pulled out one of the books in his collection and turned around to him. “You’ve got shoujo manga?! You like shoujo?!” she exclaimed, her eyes glimmering as she thrust a volume of *Our Precious Conversations* at him.

*So she DIDN’T find World’s End Harem...* Kai heaved a sigh of relief. He then joined Jun in front of the bookshelf. “I’ve loved the author ever since *My Little Monster*,” he said.

“There’s going to be an *MLM* movie soon, right?!” Jun said excitedly. “I’ve been reading the original to prepare! Who’s your favorite character?!”

“Hm, I think Asako might be my favorite out of everyone in *MLM*,” Kai replied.

“Asako RULES! She’s super-duper pure and determined and she cares so much about her friends! It’s really noble of her to be so strong-willed *because* of how badly she’s been hurt before! I wish I could be her friend! No, wait, I wish I could marry her!!” she rattled on before coming back down to earth. Then she suddenly looked away. “Yikes, I bet you thought I was being creepy just now,” she said, fidgeting uneasily.

“Noooo no no, I know what you mean! I TOTALLY get it! I love Sanae from *Scum’s Wish* too, but Asako has a different charm of her own!” he reassured her.

His desperate appeal to let her know that she had nothing to be embarrassed about succeeded, and her face lit up again. “I mean, don’t you think it’s creepy for me to be reading shoujo manga even though I’m a dude?!” he asked.

“That doesn’t matter! If it’s good, then who cares?!” Jun exclaimed.

The two of them high-fived again.

“I’ve only ever had guy friends, and none of them have ever wanted to talk with me about shoujo manga—”

“Me too! I’ve been so lonely!”

The two high-fived for a third time.

“Even though you’re a girl, Jun?!” he asked incredulously.

“My friends only read the mainstream stuff that gets made into movies,” said Jun. “I recommended the *MLM* author’s other manga and told them they were good, but all they said was, ‘Hmmm. Hmmm’! It *kills* me!”

“It’d kill me too!” Even more high-fiving.

“Oh, and even when I *do* talk to them about *MLM*, all they ever wanna do is talk about how cool the male characters are,” Jun continued. “They’re all like, ‘I wish I could get a hug from Haru!’ But when I say, ‘I wish I could smooch Asako,’ nobody gets it! They treat me like a huge weirdo! Same thing with every other manga!”

“Personally, I would LOVE to marry one of the female classmates from *OPC*—the girl with the long black hair! I wish she would look my way!”

“OH MY GOD! Kai, you understand!”

Kai and Jun went back and forth ecstatically, high-fiving one after another so many times that halfway through, they ended up just high-fiving multiple times in a row.

This was the first time they'd ever gotten this worked up over shoujo manga. It was a first for both of them.







*The world is so vast!* Kai couldn't help but think to himself.

Who knew he'd ever have this many interests in common with someone? Who knew he'd ever get along this well with someone? And not somebody of the same sex—someone of the *opposite* sex!

And what a miracle that of all the people in the whole wide world, he'd crossed paths with Jun!

Kai was touched, deeply so. Surely, Jun felt the same.



A short while after they'd calmed down, she and Kai remembered their original goal. They booted up the PS4 and prepared to play *MHW*. Jun tried to find somewhere appropriate to sit, when Kai suddenly realized: he didn't even have any cushions to sit on in his room, much less a couch. The floor was bare wood—no carpet. "...I normally just use my bed as a couch," he said, before sitting on the edge of the bed. "...So, uh, feel free."

As you might expect, Jun was hesitant at first. She'd learned to oppose sitting on a guy's bed. But in the end she ended up decisively plopping down right next to him, as was her nature.

On the other hand—far too late at this point—Kai was extremely flustered about having a girl sit on his bed. Much like her boobs, Jun's butt was extraordinarily fine, perfectly shaped, and absolutely mesmerizing. And her butt was on his bed! ON HIS BED!

Jun had also shortened her skirt, meaning that her pale thighs were exposed and right next to Kai. It was far too great of a temptation for an adolescent boy like Kai. The way she kept unconsciously pulling down the hem of her skirt to keep her underwear from showing was also indescribably arousing. He fought back the urge to gulp.

*S-Speaking of which, I guess this is the first time I've ever invited a girl to my room, isn't it...*

It had completely slipped his mind thanks to him and Jun jabbering away right from the get-go. The more he carefully considered it, though, the more he realized how absurd the entire situation was. He didn't want to think about it any further. The more he thought about it, the more aware of it he became. He'd get nervous. Hurry up and start already, *MH*! Why's it taking his PS4 so long to just boot up?!

Then—just as he was grappling with this internally—it happened.

**"Ashie**, I bought some cake! Would you and your friend like to have some?"

"JESUS, MOM, could you at least knock?!"

His heart nearly leapt out of his chest thanks to his mother, who had suddenly opened the door and popped her head in. Not that they were doing anything to be ashamed of. It was just... a bit of a surprise attack when he'd been sitting there wondering to himself, *Guess we ARE sitting pretty close... Is my mind in the gutter for even being aware of that?*

"I'll have some cake later. We were right about to play a video game," he told his mom.

"Oh, were you now?"

Kai stood up from the bed and shooed his displeased mother out of the room. He nearly returned to his original spot before realizing that this was the perfect opportunity to revisit how close he was sitting to Jun. *No no no. Now that we're friends, trying to be modest about it would be even weirder!*

He eventually ended up sitting down at about the same distance from her, his heart racing all the while.

"**Ashie**, is it true that you brought a super-cute friend over???"

"JESUS, SIS, could you at least knock?!"

His heart nearly exploded thanks to his older sister, who had suddenly opened the door and popped her head in. Not that he was doing anything to be ashamed of! Not at all!

"Man, she is a total cutie. Especially for somebody like *you*, Ashie!" his sister teased.

"SIS... She's not an exhibit," he said, annoyed. "Scram, we're gonna play *MH*."

"Yeesh, no need to get your panties in a wad. Trying to keep her all to yourself, you big studly man?"

"Yeah yeah yeah, that's what I'm doing, keeping her to myself." Kai stood up from the bed and shooed his displeased sister out of the room. He and his sister were about two years apart. While they didn't have a bad sibling relationship, it wasn't particularly great either.

He just realized: as he was flustered about inviting a girl to his room for the very first time, his family was also over the moon. They couldn't help but be curious about the female friend he brought over (and a hottie, to boot!).

"**Ashie**, I picked up some sushi! Your friend can have some too, if she wants!"

"Come ooooooon, Dad, that doesn't mean you have to come home early from work!!!"

What was WITH his family?! He shooed his father out of the room too, and then sat down on the bed, completely fed up. Fortunately, Jun seemed to be enjoying it and was giggling, not bothered by it in the slightest.

"Sorry about all the big fuss..." he apologized.

"Not at all," Jun replied. "Your family is pretty close, huh?"

"I'd really love to write 'Good fences make good neighbors' in my mom's dictionary..."

"Also, I'd love some sushi."

"Sure, go ahead and have some of that at least," he said. "Besides, it's already paid for."

"Also, Kai?" Jun asked.

"What, Jun?"

"What do they mean by 'Ashie'?"

Kai ignored her question.

"Isn't that odd? How come they call you 'Ashie' when your name is Kai?" Jun was relentless in her cross-examination.

"AHHHHH, I can't hear you!"

"Should I be calling you 'Ashie' too?" He covered his ears with his hands and pretended like he couldn't hear her, but she wouldn't let up.

*I didn't want her to know, if I could manage it...* He resolved himself and decided to come clean, bitter about his outspoken family.

"Do you know how to write my name?" Kai asked her. Since the entrance ceremony was today, she would've seen his name card on his desk along with the flowers if she'd been paying attention.

"Nakamura, right?"

"What about my first name?"

"It's spelled with the character '*hai*' meaning 'ashes,' but pronounced 'Kai,' right?" Jun responded. "Even *I* know that spelling."

"That was a lie."

"Huh?"

"I introduced myself to you and during homeroom as 'Kai Nakamura,' but I lied," he said.

"Huh? Huh?"

"It's actually pronounced differently."

"Huh? Huh? Huh?" Jun was completely taken by surprise that he was lying about how to pronounce his name. It was impossible *not* to be shocked by it, though.

Despite how incredibly befuddled she sounded, Kai didn't notice. He continued on. "My name is pronounced 'Ash,'" he confessed in a monotonous, matter-of-fact way.

For a moment, Jun couldn't manage a reaction. "...What?"

"It's pronounced 'Ash.'"

"..."

"Yeah, I know it's a weird name. A real bizarre name. Laugh if you want to."

"But your mom and dad seem like such squares..."

"They were pretty young though, right?" Kai pointed out. "They got married when they were students. Apparently they were a real *chuuni* couple who aspired to be a manga artist and an LN author. They hooked up, got knocked up, and that's what they named me," he explained at length in desperation. (His sister's name, by the way, was Serena as in 'serenade.' Cringey, right?) "That's why my family calls me 'Ashie.'"

Jun froze for a brief moment, perhaps in shock. Then, she pointed a trembling finger at him and asked, "So, 'Ash Nakamura'?"

"...Go ahead and laugh."

"Pfft—"

"WOW, you're actually going to laugh?!"

"Laugh or don't, which is it?!" Jun's objection was valid, although he hoped she would've considered his fragile mental state!

“...Well, because of that, I’d appreciate it if you pretended like you didn’t know,” he told her. “Keep calling me ‘Kai,’ please.”

“Mm, you got it,” Jun agreed with relative ease. He figured she’d tease him a little more. “I’ll keep it a secret from the rest of the class too.”

“Thanks.” That was the end of *that* conversation. Or at least, that’s what Kai thought when he thanked her. But then—

Her graceful, long eyelashes quivered with sorrow.

“What’s wrong?” Kai pressed her, to show he’d listen if she had something important to say. Eventually, Jun steeled herself before bashfully confiding in him.

“...Do you know how to write *my* name?”

“Huh. Well, uh...” He did remember it, because he saw it was spelled in an unusual way when he looked at the name card on her desk. Her name was written ‘Jun Miyakawa,’ with two kanji characters for her first name even though it was only one syllable.

“It’s written with the character ‘*jun*’ meaning ‘pure’ twice, which you combine into one syllable and just pronounce ‘Jun,’ right?” he offered.

“Unusual, but sophisticated and stylish.”

“That was a lie.”

“Wha?”

“I introduced myself to everybody as Jun, but I lied,” she said.

“...Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“How is it actually pronounced?”

“‘Pure pure.’”

“...Wha?”

“It’s spelled like ‘Junjun,’ but pronounced ‘Purepure!’” Jun yelled desperately. “*Purepure... Purepure... Purepure...*” echoed throughout the room.

Holding back the urge to burst into laughter, Kai pointed a trembling finger at her and asked, “So, ‘Purepure Miyakawa’?”

“Yeah, I know it’s a weird name. A real bizarre name.”

“Were your parents aspiring to be manga artists or LN authors too?”

“This otaku apple doesn’t fall far from the tree!”

“What do they call you at home? ‘Pupu’?” he inquired.

“I’d K-word my parents if they didn’t call me ‘Jun.’”

“Hey, ‘Pupu’ can be yummy, like pupu platter.”

“Did you say something, †Ash†?”

“I’m sorry, it was nothing!” he apologized, throwing himself on his hands and knees. After holding that position for a while, Jun burst into laughter.

“Pfft—”

Kai laughed too, still on his hands and knees. Once he started, neither of them could stop.

“Oh my god, this is crazy!”

“Ohhhh my god!”

"I can't believe we both have freaking ridiculous names, too!"

"And what's so funny about that?" asked Kai, despite finding the whole thing incredibly funny. Jun was in stitches too, kicking both legs around in laughter. Her soft-looking thighs jiggled healthily and evocatively before his very eyes. ANYWHO...

"Definitely keep it a secret from everybody else."

"I'll definitely keep it on the down low."

And that's how their relationship began, one year ago.



Now back to present day, a week and some change since the entrance ceremony for their second year of high school. Just like every other day, Jun came to hang out at Kai's house once school was out.

They were sitting next to each other on his bed, enjoying an online game on their two TVs and PS4s. It was a third-person shooter where players fought 15-vs-15 using tanks. Kai and Jun had formed a tag team called a "platoon," and were on the same team.

The match began. "This passive scouting spot is *sick*. I've got a full view of where the enemy is."

"Nice!!!"

"Alright—got them right where we want 'em! Camp that spot!"

"Aiming riiiiight now~"

"Watch! The enemies are gonna drop like flies, bwahaha!"

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOBS!"

The two were pretty pumped because the battle had been in their favor right from the opening gambit. Kai and Jun were on the very edge of their seats holding their gamepads.

"Huh, something just hit me."

"You been spotted, Kai?"

"Nah... My sixth sense's not going off. This has gotta be somebody pre-firing!"

"Your health bar's going down pretty fast, huh, Kai?"

"Crap, there's a unicum on the enemy team?! Run, RUUUUN! They're sweeping the floor with our Tier 5 asses. We got *smurfed*!!!"

"WE'RE THE NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOBS!"

Now suddenly on the losing side, Jun and Kai's faces were bright red as they clutched their controllers. But alas, their efforts were in vain—Kai's Luchs was blasted to bits! Jun's Pz. IV H was blown away too.

"H-Holy shit..."

"That w-was terrifying..."

Kai and Jun sat there completely dumbfounded, still gripping their controllers even after they'd sadly been ejected. Proof of just how absorbed they'd been in the game.

Because of that, they didn't even realize that at some point, they'd pressed up against each other just like a couple watching a horror movie in terror.

*Gah...* Kai could feel his pulse quicken. He was *very* aware of how squishy Jun's arm felt. Even though guys tease their girlfriends for having little sticks for arms—and she just was all skin and bone—Jun's arm was unbelievably plump and exquisitely soft.

*Gulp. Uh. What do I do now...*

To be completely honest, he wished they could stay pressed up against each other forever. It felt good. She was so squishy. And, it wasn't like they were doing anything *bad*—he wasn't massaging her boobs or anything like that. They were friends first and foremost. Wouldn't it be way more hypersensitive of him to worry about every single little thing, like whether or not their arms and shoulders were touching? He oughta just take it in stride, right?

The more he tried to build an argument for it in his head, the more devious it made him feel. What in the world was he supposed to do?

*I'll leave it up to Jun!* If Jun pulled away from him, so be it.

But her face didn't show a single ounce of unwillingness. In fact, she didn't seem to mind sitting like this at all. Meaning, Kai was totally in the clear! Street smarts, 1-0!

"Hey, Kai?"

Being spoken to right as he was thinking these Extremely Devious and Shameful things made Kai nearly jump off the bed. "Y-Yes, whazzit?" he blurted out. His voice cracked, he came off way too polite, and to top it off, he'd also stumbled over his words.

Whether or not she knew about the simple, boyish feelings running through his mind, Jun then asked, "Your arm stiffened up?" She squeezed Kai's upper arm to see what it felt like, inching even closer to him. Holy moly. She was taking it a step further despite having no idea just how torn he was. Kai was all worried for nothing!

"Like, did you get buffer?"

"Say that again, Jun?"

"Hm?" she asked.

"Say I got 'buffer' one more time." He'd just learned for the first time how happy it made him feel to hear a girl say those words. Not even guys know how a guy's mind works.

"Ew..." Jun's face darkened, clearly saying, "*We might be friends, BUT...*"

Kai felt bad. Then, he answered her question seriously. "Oh, I guess *Fitness Boxing* is starting to pay off!" he said, name-dropping an exercise game for the Switch he'd been really into recently.

"You're still playing that?"

"It's fun."

"I give up on that game! One session gave me muscle cramps!" Jun huffed.

"I *told* you, it only hurts the first time!"

"No filthy remarks allowed, then!"

"No 'reading into things too much' allowed, then!"

As they laughed together, Kai was reminded of the day he bought the game.

He played it with Jun first because it had a two-player mode. The game had a boxing theme and called for those movements, but the point was to keep the rhythm going by punching at the right time and doing evasive maneuvers. Though not particularly fun, it felt good to get their bodies moving. Jun and Kai got *really* into it and played against each other for about two hours.

The next day, however, all those muscles Kai normally didn't use screamed out in pain. His arms in particular hurt so bad they were practically numb. It went straight to Kai's head. "Gotcha... The aching means I'm getting stronger..."

Jun, on the other hand, felt differently. "This SUCKS! My whole body hurts! Don't buy weird games Kai, you big dummy!" she chewed him out. Perhaps guys and girls just have different ways of seeing and feeling things. Or maybe only one of them was the dummy.

End flashback.

"Well... Sorry, but I guess if you like it, Kai—I mean, it's good you're sticking with it, I suppose," Jun shrugged.

"Yup. You're looking at a guy who's done 10,000 punches in a single month."

"Suuure. And, well, guess there's nothing wrong with getting in shape either," she continued, still leaning against him. She smiled with her eyes and—seemingly off in a world of her own—caressed his forearm. Maybe his arms, toned from day after day of *Fitness Boxing*, felt nice to the touch just like Jun's squishy forearms felt to him as a guy.

*N-No, we're just friends though!*

Kai was on cloud nine despite his misgivings. Pressing his luck, he said, "If you ever find yourself in a fight with some thugs, I'll step in and knock 'em out for you."

"You *sure* I can expect that from you?"

"My bad, I got carried away," Kai admitted. "I'm a chicken. Let's just call the police together."

"Ahaha! You're right. The most important thing is not getting hurt."

"Us otaku are pacifists!" he agreed.

"We only man tanks in video ga—" Jun began to say. Right as they were beginning to settle down, the match she and Kai had retired from also

finished up on their TV screens. Of course, the unicum on the enemy team had eight kills. Their team got crushed.

"Alright, wanna have a review session?"

"Sure!"

Reviewing how you played was crucial to improving at the tank game *World of Tanks*. For this reason, Kai and Jun always checked the Battle Replays together, something players could view after the match had ended. Now to see how they fared...

"You were missing a lot of shots, Jun," Kai commented. "All my beautiful passive scouting down the drain!"

"I blame you for all the bullets you sent flying off into God knows where!"

"That's why I told you to pick the T-34! I told you, have some faith in the Almighty Pom-Pom and the pro-Soviet bias."

"But weren't you manning a German tank too, Kai?"

"It's my right to prefer the Luchs! It's the strongest Tier 4 light tank!"

"And I prefer the IV. I'd rather be with the Anglerfish Team."

"Alright alright, *Girls und Panzer* fangirl. *WoT*'s not all fun and games!"

"Weren't *you* the dingus who cried when we saw the *GuP* movie and told me, with your nose dripping snot everywhere, you were gonna start playing *WoT*?"

"My nose *wasn't* dripping!"

Even though their shoulders were still pressed together, a dark mood began to fill the air. The nice vibe from before had all but disappeared.

"...If you *are* gonna use a IV, then at least stop using the 10.5. You've got shit aim," Kai said in a very nasty tone of voice. As soon as the words left his mouth, a thick, angry vein appeared on Jun's temple.

"*EXCUSE* me? YOU'RE the piece of shit bringing your own partner's health down getting all trigger happy with the 10.5!" she fumed, shouldering him hard.

*I was just trash-talking. She's ready to resort to violence!* Kai thought to himself. She was in the mood for payback, times ten.

"Alright, let's try putting this to use in battle. Blast 'em away with our in-fighting!" he said jokingly, shouldering her back with about the same amount of force. "You're pretty much my enemy at this point. You're scaring me!"

Jun countered back by giving Kai's thigh a solid smack!

"You keep saying, *I'm scared, I'm scared.* And *you're* a tanker?!" Kai continued, giving Jun's thigh a solid smack back!

*...Wait, was that bare skin?! I touched her bare skin?!*

It'd completely escaped Kai's mind that, unlike him, Jun wasn't wearing any pants. He'd only hit her lightly in a joking way, but the feeling of smacking a bouncy flesh of a girl's thigh with his bare hands filled his palm with an immoral ecstasy. The way her thigh jiggled from the impact was also erotic.



But it snapped him back to reality. He realized how fruitless and ridiculous their steadily escalating argument had been.

"Alright, guess we sh—"

"Who are YOU kidding with this tanker crap when you don't have the goddamn *BALLS* for it yourself?!"

Jun was still angry. Her hand shot out and *immediately* **grabbed** him by the crotch.

"URGHK." A strange sound came out of Kai's mouth.

But that snapped Jun back to reality, too. Still holding onto Kai's crotch, she stiffened, and her beautiful face reddened to an amusing degree. "I-I'm sorry," she mumbled.

"D-Don't worry about it."

"I'll l-let go right now."

"C-Could you please?" Things would get weird if she didn't.

"I'm really sorry," said Jun. She faked a smile, and—still red from ear to ear—slowly, quietly moved her hand away from Kai's crotch. Then she wiped her hand with a handkerchief.

*...I'm gonna cry! That hurt!* Kai thought to himself, though he said nothing. True men weep on the inside. He looked back at the replay footage and said, "...There wasn't much to learn from this round anyway."

"Yeah. That unicum absolutely creamed us."

"Upload the video somewhere."

"We'd be the butt of the joke if I did," Jun pointed out.

"...How about another then?"

"Sure. This time *we'll* be the ones making the jokes!"

"Welp, I'll be countin' on you, partner."

"Leave it to me, partner."

They fist bumped. Then, Kai picked his gamepad back up and remade his platoon with Jun.

The game *WoT* took a long time to load before each match. Their basic strategy was to analyze both sides and predict how the battle might go. The screen showed thirty player usernames, including those on the enemy team, and the names of their tanks.

Kai looked around when suddenly, his eyes landed on their names.

Selected tank: "Luchs." Player username: "Ash."

Selected tank: "Pz. IV H." Player username: "pure-pure."

"I, uh—"

"What?" Jun asked. Her lips were pursed cutely in concentration. "The match is about to start."

Kai ignored her and said, "I always had a complex about my name."

"...I did too."

"But now I don't because I've got a friend. And now that I've got a friend here with me, it doesn't feel like such a big deal. I'm not even scared of people laughing at me for it anymore."

"Same. Me too."

The two of them giggled at the same time like it was contagious. That change of attitude was precisely the reason why he and Jun were nicknaming themselves "Ash" and "pure-pure" on purpose now, without even batting an eye.

He'd become a bit stronger, mentally. He'd gotten one step closer to being an adult. All because he'd met his best friend, someone who meant the world to him!

"Speaking of which, Kai—"

"What? The match is right about to start," Kai said, warning her to focus.

But Jun ignored him and said, "The whole class knows your name's actually 'Ash,' Kai."

"Wh... What do you..." Kai was so mind blown, he put his gamepad down. Unfortunately, the match began, and his Luchs—which *needed* the momentum from the opening gambit—remained stalled at the starting position. The other players continued blazing across the map.

"But it won't faze you if they laugh 'cause you've got me, right?"

"Alright then, guess I'll leak your real name too, Jun!"

"I'd die."

Then what was in store for Kai?!

## Episode 002 - Since Our Class Is Full of Normies, I'd Like to Live Life My Way

"DAMN YOOOU, KISHIMOTOOO! WHAT WERE YOU THINKING???"

Kai's angry voice bellowed throughout 2-A's classroom, where only about half of the students had arrived for school.

"Hm? What're you on about Nakamura? You're full of energy for this early in the morning," asked Kousuke Kishimoto.

Fastidious about his appearance, Kishimoto was a stylish guy who fortified his average build and utterly forgettable face with a keen sense of fashion, which gave him a leg up. Kishimoto was also second to none at getting girls. His success rate for asking girls out wasn't all that high. They'd often bring up breaking up shortly after tentatively getting together, but throw spaghetti at the wall and yada yada yada. He was the kind of dude unpopular guys everywhere despised because there were very few stretches of time when he didn't have a girlfriend. Kishimoto's reputation wasn't all that bad, either, since he absolutely never cheated by trying to date two girls at a time.

Kai didn't hate him. Which is to say, he'd probably even count him as a friend. They had pretty similar tastes in manga. Kai had also been in the same class as Kishimoto all through middle school, making them friends by proximity. Although they didn't particularly plan it that way, they both picked the same high school as their first choice and took the entrance exam together. He and Kishimoto fell out of touch since they were in different classes during their first year of high school. Now that they were in the same class this year, though, he was stuck with him again.

He forcefully grabbed his middle school pal by the collar and asked in a barely contained whisper, "Kishimoto... you knew my real name, yeah?"

"And what about it, Ash?"

"I told you not to tell anyone, didn't I?" Kai threatened, his temple twitching.

Back in middle school, a group of people—including Kishimoto—found out his real name. It was something Kai wished he could forget. It went down exactly the way it had with Jun: they became friends, he invited them over to his house to hang out. Then, his mom and sister referred to him as 'Ashie'...

"I asked you not to spread it around though, *didn't I?*"

"Oh, uh... I still remember."

"Kishimoto. You'd do anything to get in a girl's pants, but I *know* you're a good dude... So why would you go and break our promise *now?*"

"I honestly have no idea what you mean~"

"Don't play innocent with me." Kai growled. "I've got evidence that you started it."

"Grk!" Kishimoto let out a cry that sounded like a chicken being strangled.

That's right. Kai had evidence. Everyone in the class had just introduced themselves during homeroom on the first day of school, two weeks prior. Afterwards, while everybody else was mingling, *this* guy apparently hit on every single one of the hot girls in their class.

It seems like he never had the chance with Jun (because she went to Kai's house right after school), but she'd heard all about his impressive... drive. That's because Jun was already friends with pretty much all the girls in the class, who'd constructed their own info network on the messaging app LINE. And the juicy morsel that their widely-cast net fished up was...

"I heard Nakamura's name is 'Ash'!"

"Kishimoto told me."

"I laughed."

Kai made a big show of clenching his fist. "Which would you prefer: being punched on the right cheek, or being punched on the left cheek?" he asked menacingly.

"K-Knock it off," said Kishimoto, cowering. "Aren't you a pacifist, Nakamura?"

"Did you know, there's no telling what an otaku will do when you piss them off?"

"I couldn't help it! I had my reasons!"

"Oh yeah?" Kai said in a hushed voice, with the implication that he'd let him off easy if he provided details. Sure enough, Kishimoto desperately pleaded his case.

"Reina told me she *really* wanted to get to know you better!"

"You only did it to look like a big shot in front of a girl?! YOU THIRSTY-ASS SON OF A BITCH!!!" Kai grabbed Kishimoto by the collar and shook him like a rag doll. He wouldn't do much more than that, though. It went without (Kishimoto) saying that all otaku were indeed pacifists. And despite the fact that he was now a 10,000-punch-a-month guy, lethal weapons Kai's fists were not. (He'd never had the chance to find out for sure outside of *Fitness Boxing*.)

"I've had it with you. Our friendship is OVER after today," spat Kai.

"Man, zip it," Kishimoto shot back. "You're the double-crosser for nabbing a pretty girl like Jun behind my back!"

"J-Jun isn't my girlfriend or anything, though!"

"I'm just jealous that you go home with her every single daAAaYNGHRNGHK! I don't want your friendshiiPPppHGnrHK!"

"Consider that bridge BURNED!"

After they were done hurling insults at each other, Kai let go of Kishimoto's collar. He wasn't satisfied, but there was no use crying over spilled milk. He saw no point in charging this skirt-chaser with his crimes.

Kai went back to his seat at the tail end of the middle row. From there, he glanced over at the window situated at the front of the classroom. All the popular girls were camped out there, chit-chatting. The whole group (including Jun) had yet to show up for school, but the “core” group of Class 2-A girls—and the key figure their group was centered around—were already there.

Reina Fujisawa.

Yup, the girl Kishimoto had blabbed his real name to. If Jun was the prettiest girl in their year, then Reina was the prettiest woman. She possessed such a mature beauty, it was hard to believe she was actually a high school student. Reina was breathtakingly fine, not to mention stylish and also tall. There’d been a bit of a commotion last year about a girl who was modeling when she enrolled at their school. She wasn’t quite front-page material, but she was still a knockout. An absolute knockout. Nobody else in Asagi High came close.





There was also a rumor going around that Reina had a totally outrageous boyfriend, too. He was a young entrepreneur (to the cops, and a yakuza thug to everyone else) or something like that. Regardless of whether it was fact or fiction, it seemed possible for a scary girl like Reina, who wore her intensity—or rather, her intimidating aura—like beautiful armor.

Kai stared at her scary but gloriously beautiful face, trying to be stealthy about it. But he'd been discovered, and he and Reina made eye contact. Reina immediately shot him a stunning smile. That's right, stunning.

Jun's smile was carefree, without a single ounce of girlish flattery, and allowed her cheerful disposition to shine through. On the other hand, Reina's smile was a 100% exquisitely *manufactured* smile. It took everything both good and bad about girls and turned them into weapons to arm Reina with.

*Terrifying...*

Rather than feeling overjoyed that a beautiful girl had smiled at him, Kai averted his gaze, shaking in his boots. At the same time, he wondered, *Why would someone as great as her want to know anything about ME?*

*Does she like me?* He was 10,000% certain that she didn't.

*Did she want to torture me?* There was about a 1% chance of that...

Reina might have liked Kai or hated his guts, but they'd met so rarely that Kai didn't have much evidence to suggest which side she landed on. But if he had to push himself and hazard a guess...

*I'm Jun's friend, and she's friends with Jun too, so maybe...?*

She and Jun weren't from the same middle school, but it seemed like they knew each other before entering high school. Although Reina had been in the class next to theirs last year, he'd seen her acting quite chummy with Jun in the halls and cafeteria during breaks.

However, he'd heard from Jun that she was pretty busy with modeling jobs outside school, so they hardly ever hung out. If Reina had had a lot of free time on her hands, Jun would've never started hanging around Kai's place, and she would *never* have accepted his invitation to come over and play *MHW* at the beginning...

*Stop it.* Reina was the kind of girl who made him fully aware of how spineless he was for even thinking that.

*Would it be too far-fetched to think that maybe... she thought the same of me?* Kai couldn't come up with an answer. He peeped over her way, careful not to make eye contact with her this time. But... Reina wasn't standing directly in front of Kai anymore.

A guy named Matsuda had started hitting on her and the other girls as soon as he showed up to class. He was accompanied by his friends—no, his cronies Takeda, Umeda and Fukuda. They were now being a little bit *too* friendly with Reina and her group. These four were Class 2-A's resident cool bros. If Jun and Reina were at the top of the female totem pole at school, then Matsuda and his crew were on their way to being at the top among the



males. They all had colored hair, their uniforms had lost their shape from being worn so much, and they were *way* thirstier than even Kishimoto. Brains, totally fried. The common denominator among the four was that they were all on the basketball team.

*What's sooo great about being able to play a sport that gives them so much confidence?* Kai felt. Or at least, he did in middle school. The guys on the baseball and soccer teams at Asagi High School were *really* good, though. Good enough to go to nationals. They were as disciplined as soldiers because the coaches for both teams were *very* thorough with training. Although a few of the players were in Kai's class, they were always humble, polite, and never made a peep.

Even from a guy's point of view, Kai honestly thought they were pretty cool. He had a lot of respect for them. It had been a wake-up call for Kai, who used to be prejudiced toward jocks. Kai figured they'd be more like Matsuda and his crew, acting like they were hot shit even though their grades were nothing to write home about.

In comparison, the Asagi High basketball team was a joke. Now that his eyes had been opened to it, they seemed more and more asinine to Kai by the day.

"Ayyyy, Reina!"

"Wanna do some karaoke with us today?"

"Come listen to me sing some Kanjani songs!"

"There he goes again. Okay but for real though, Matsuda *kills* at Kanjani!"

Matsuda and his gang yammered on like simpletons who probably couldn't even tie their own shoes (in Kai's biased opinion) while hitting on the girls.

"Say what now?"

"Take a look in a mirror and try again."

"Can't you tell? We're saying, '*Yeah right*' about you and your boy band crap."

"Way to dunk on him, Shou."

The girls turned their noses up at them. V-*Very* scary... particularly Reina, who was leaning against the bottom pane of the open window. She truly did have the bearing of a yakuza mistress standing there with her arms folded and her penetrating gaze. She really *was* a high schooler, though... right?

But since Matsuda and his crew brazenly refused to back down, Reina and her girls just continued to give them the ice queen treatment. Pitiful.

Most of the time in manga, the normie characters at the top of the class totem pole would form a single group of hot guys and girls, and they'd get along splendidly. In Kai's year, however, there was also a *third* group of mean girls headed by popular chick Suama Sakakibara. People in class formed friend groups regardless of gender and occasionally hung out together, but Kai had *never* seen any of them hang out 24/7 with someone

they weren't boyfriend or girlfriend with. Reina's group—which Jun was also a part of—was especially leery about this.

Reina herself had mad normie energy too, but at the same time possessed a firm, 'I keep men at a distance' attitude. She'd been famous for this since their first year. Hence, the 'Reina has an outrageous boyfriend who doesn't go to this school' rumors that were going around.

The warning bell for the short morning homeroom period finally rang, and Matsuda's posse retreated with their tails between their legs. They were replaced by Jun, who came barging into the classroom just in time to not be counted late. She turned right to Reina's clique and said, "Hiya! Did you watch the video I texted you guys yesterday?!"

"Kiiiitty cat slaaaap!"

"Oh my goood, it was so cute! ♥♥♥"

"Wow, that video really blew up."

"Nobody can resist kids or animals!"

The girls were having a lively conversation about the video Jun had shared... even though Kai was the one who found the video.

It was clear that everyone was supposed to sit down at their desks when the warning bell rang, but Jun and Reina's group stayed by the window yakking away until the teacher appeared. Even when the teacher showed up on time and gave them all a lecture, the girls just smiled and said, "Oopsies!" as they took a seat. That wasn't out of character for Reina, either. Though she normally presented the smiling facade of a high schooler, one could catch a good, long glimpse of her natural face when—and only when—she was with Jun. Wait, maybe that was fake too. But to Kai, at least, it seemed like a genuine smile.



Kai had made plans to go to the cafeteria with the guys during lunch that day. He headed to the cafeteria, which was on the first floor of a separate building, with another classmate named Seiji Satou.

Satou was a friend he'd made after starting high school. They were in the same class together last year. He was an otaku friend who read manga too, but was much more passionate about watching late-night anime and collecting merch. Kishimoto wasn't much into those things, however, so the topic of conversation shifted exclusively to manga. The three of them got super psyched talking about yesterday's new issue of *Manga UP!*.

Unlike after school, or their days off, Kai and Jun didn't hang out much at school. One reason was that the "Isn't it weird that they hang out 24/7 even though they're not boyfriend and girlfriend? What a fuck boy/slut" vibe hung over the entire school like a thin layer of smoke. To Kai, Jun was his best friend in the whole wide world. But, well, the second reason was that—like Kishimoto and Satou—it wasn't like he didn't have other friendships besides her. Same for Jun. So at school, Kai mostly hung out with his guy friends, and Jun hung out with her girl friends.

The school cafeteria at Asagi High School was pretty snazzy, as you might expect from a private high school. They had the usual system where a machine dispensed meal tickets in front of the entrance. Students then lined up in front of the open kitchen holding their trays, and a nice lady would give them food.

However, the interior design was so hip it sorta felt like a Starbucks (or as Jun would say, *"Nuh-uh! It's like Doutor!"*). The eating area also didn't look like your average cafeteria. The long tables were arranged in a very precise manner—it had none of the usual 'Okie dokie, squeeze yourself in, eat, then leave!' vibes of a school cafeteria. There were square tables seating two and four, in addition to round eight-person tables and chairs. The seating had been perfectly arranged in a tasteful way, much more so than a family restaurant.

"Eh, the interior might be super swank. I'm still just gonna order a sweet and sour pork combo, though," said Kai.

"I'm getting the Meat Lover's combo."

"I'll have the pork cutlet bowl."

Kai and his friends staked out an open four-person table, and picked up where they left off on their manga conversation now that they had their food.

As one might expect from a private school, the lunches here were more expensive than other school cafeterias in the area, but they didn't cut corners. Although "restaurant" might be a stretch, the flavor of their food was good enough for a "popular eatery in the neighborhood."

The sweet and sour pork combo Kai ordered was fried to a perfect crisp, maintaining its texture despite being covered in a generous amount of sauce. The soggy outer breading and perfectly untouched inner layer came together in delicious harmony. It beautifully trapped in all the juices, meaning every bite filled his mouth with unctuous flavor.

Kai used to be in the "it's wrong to put pineapple in sweet and sour pork" camp, but eating it here converted him. Did they use an extra acidic variety in the dish? This dish could be pretty one-note once your tongue got used to the sweetness of the sauce, but the pineapple served as a striking palate cleanser.

"This sweet and sour pork is FIRE!"

"So's my pork cutlet bowl!"

"I'm glad I picked Asagi High, just for the cafeteria!"

"Same!" said the three growing boys to one another while chowing down. But they wouldn't get the chance to finish their food.

"Mind if we sit here?" said a voice out of the blue.

It was Reina Fujisawa.

Although her tone of voice was polite and ladylike, it had a seductive ring to it. Her voice was almost dripping with sex appeal. Behind her was Jun, looking apologetic and trying to make herself as small as possible, and another diminutive girl whose constant flirtiness annoyed Kai.

Kai looked Reina straight in the eye and answered, "...Can't you tell by looking?" *Three of us. Three of you. The table seats four.* Though he wasn't quite sure what she was planning, even a kindergartener could tell whether they had any open seats.

"It's not nice to be combative with a girl, Ash," Reina responded.

"Girls don't like when you do that, Ash~☆"

"Knock it off! That name really kills me inside!" Kai surrendered. The sheer violence of what Reina and the short girl were saying immediately made him raise a white flag.

Kishimoto, on the other hand, was positively *thrilled*. "Yoohoo! Reina, Jun, Momo, come sit over here! I'll move all this stuff outta the way for you right now!" he called out to them.

"Satou and I aren't *things* in the way," whined Kai. Were *these* the words of a man who just accused somebody else of being a traitor this morning?

"Much appreciated."

"Oh, you know me, I'm a real considerate guy!" he boasted. "It's ladies first all day, every day with me!"

"All right, enjoy your lunch with Satou then. *Somewhere else*," Reina said.

"Huh?"

"Oh? Is something the matter, 'ladies first all day, every day,' Kishimoto?"

"N-No, ma'am," he stammered, trembling. Pressured by Reina, Kishimoto got up from his seat and made a run for it with Satou.

Kai expected no less from a yakuza's sweetheart. Reina was simply standing there smiling, not looking intimidating at all. And yet, the look in her eyes was so scary it sent a chill down his spine.

"Don't ditch me, guys!" Kai objected, but Kishimoto and Satou were long gone.

Jun put her tray down and cried out to them as they hightailed it out of there. "Sorry Reina's being so demanding, guys!" she apologized.

Anyway. Kai was unexpectedly boxed in by Reina and company at lunch.

Jun sat to his right, while Reina had taken up the seat on his left. The other short girl, infamous for being Reina's shadow ever since middle school, was a member of Reina's group named Momoko Mihara from Class 2-A. Looks: cute, in the way small animals are. Personality: annoying as hell. That was all there was to say about her.

"So? What did you want from me, Fujisawa?" Kai asked, picking at his half-eaten sweet and sour pork without bothering to hide his caution.

"Oh my," Reina replied. "Do I need to have a reason to eat with a classmate of mine?"

"We just thought we'd come say hey 'cause we bump into you from time to time~☆ BoOoo~☆ You're soOoo full of yourself~☆" Reina covered her

hand with her mouth and laughed daintily while Momoko talked smack in a cutesy way.

"I must be hot shit for you to chase off Kishimoto and Satou just because you, quote, 'bump into me from time to time,'" Kai said tersely. "Bar none."

"I'm really sorry about that. Just stay, Kai. I'll go and apologize to them later," Jun pleaded, her hands pressed together in apology. She still hadn't touched her food.

*I know. It's okay. If you don't eat now, you'll run out of time, Kai told her through eye contact.*

Relieved, Jun began eating her teriyaki chicken plate (which also looked delicious). Reina, on the other hand, watched Jun and Kai with a radiant smile on her face. "Ash, I just—"

"It's Nakamura to you!" he corrected Reina.

"Ash, I just wanted to have a nice, long chat with you."

"What, you big bully?"

"You and Jun have interests in common, yes?" Reina inquired. "What have you found interesting lately?"

Kai was hesitant to say anything even though he didn't mind the question itself. He never went out of his way to hide the fact that he was an otaku; he didn't think for a single second that it was the sort of embarrassing hobby he needed to hide. Even if somebody talked about him behind his back for being an otaku, *he* would actually laugh at *them* for being uncultured and embarrassed enough to point fingers at people for it.

But he could take a hint. It wasn't rocket science: babbling about his otaku hobbies in front of people who didn't know anything about them would be extremely cringey. He just had to accept that his one hobby—which wasn't outlandish in the slightest—came off completely unorthodox to others. Kai could keep a conversation about makeup going despite having no interest in it, for example, but that would be a terrible time. It is what it is.

There were no "classes" or "ranks" when it came to hobbies: they were something you enjoyed on your own, or shared if you were blessed enough to have friends with the same interests. You never pushed them onto other people. Or at least that's how Kai felt, which is why he hesitated to say anything. He had no way of telling how far he could go, how much to say, or whether or not it would even make sense to her.

Jun gave him a helping hand. "Right now we're really into this video game where you fight 15-vs.-15 using tanks. Co-op mode gets pretty intense."

"Yeah, yup," Kai nodded along, flustered.

Reina was blatantly startled upon hearing this—another rare glimpse of her raw, unfiltered emotions. It wasn't long, however, before her absolutely flawless smile returned. "Yes, it's fun playing co-op," Reina nodded along as if she thought it was wonderful too, pretending (well, *probably* pretending) to relate. She really *was* terrifying.

Momoko, on the other hand, was laughing her head off. “HAHA~☆ Tanks?? Like, whaaat??? You gotta be kidding me~ You think that crap is *fun*? Ewww~☆” she cackled. Annoying as hell, no?

“DO. *NOT*. Make fun of *WoT*,” Jun snapped.

“You went too far, Momoko,” Reina chimed in at the same time. She and Jun pinched her by the cheeks, with Reina pinching her in an especially nasty way despite her uncannily angelic smile.

“JEEZ, I’M SORRY. I’M SORRY!” Momoko yelped, on the verge of tears. Eventually they took mercy on her and let go. She’d been asking for it, though. Moron.

*But... Oh well.* There was one thing Kai knew for damn sure. Reina may have been startled and probably clueless about the whole tank thing. But this gorgeous, terrifying chick had the intelligence and wherewithal to hide her inner thoughts, and not abruptly reject another person’s interests. Actually, it was *precisely* these traits that made Reina so pretty. It’s not just the face they’re born with that makes a person beautiful. Momoko was a perfect example of this. Her sweet appearance was wasted on her, thanks to her complete lack of intelligence and awful personality.

“Soooo, Myaakawaaa~☆” Annoying AF Momoko began to say as she rubbed her cheeks. They were still red from being pinched. “Never mind that tank crap. Wanna karaoke with me today~?”

“I *told* you, I think it’s fun!” Jun protested. “Also, I already have plans to hang out with Kai today.”

“SooOoo~?☆ Who’s more important to you, me or Ash~?”

“Ummm...” Jun made a troubled face from being picked on. Annoying AF Momoko might just be nastier than Matsuda and his posse, even.

“Knock it off, Momoko,” Reina admonished her in an even more forceful tone than before. “I keep telling you: a lady only teases to delight others. Teasing only to bother or embarrass somebody else is a real *bitch* move.”

Despite the extreme phrase she used at the end, it was an incredibly adult opinion. Kai couldn’t help but be impressed. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem to have any effect on the moron in question.

“Hee hee☆ Not true~! All a girl needs is a pretty face~☆” said Momoko, who hadn’t learned her lesson at all. “Come karaoke with me, MyaakawaAa~☆ Come ooon, aren’t we friends~?”

“I *told* you, I already have plans!” Jun stood her ground. “The route campaign for the T-62A Kai’s been leveling up ends today. Can we go to karaoke tomorrow?”

“NoOo, I wanna sing todAAaay!☆ I’m in the mood for karaoke, no thanks to Matsuda☆” Momoko whined, continuing to throw a tantrum like a little kid.

*Sigh... Your hands are tied, Kai said to Jun via telepathy again. Just go to karaoke. There’ll be another campaign soon.*

*Hold on...*

*It’s fine! It’s not like I can’t beat it on my own!*

He wasn't a brat like Annoying AF Momoko. He'd never ask a stupid question just to put Jun on the spot like, "Who's more important to you, me or Mihara?" He had no intentions of hogging her all to himself, either. Furthermore, Kai would feel incredibly guilty if things got awkward between Jun and her girl friends as a result of her prioritizing their plans together. Friendship was important, and Kai was kind—and thoughtful—enough to know that.

Sure enough, his feelings on the matter seemed to make it through to Jun.

"Sorry, Momoko. I'm hanging out with Kai today," Jun said firmly.

Momoko's jaw dropped at Jun's unexpected response. Kai shot her the *same exact look*.

"Eheheh!" All Reina said after bursting into laughter was, "Lovely."

Kai couldn't even react, nor could he really tell how he felt about all this. But he was definitely embarrassed. He felt self-conscious, and his cheeks were hot. He couldn't bring himself to look directly at Reina.

On the other hand, this put Momoko in a dour mood almost instantly. She growled like a puppy who woke up on the wrong side of the bed.

Her face then suddenly lit up as if something had just dawned on her. "You should come with us to karaoke then, Ash~!☆" she exclaimed. "Then Myaakawa can come too~!"

"Huh?" Kai blurted out.

"Wha?" Jun said at the same time. Both their mouths were hanging open. Yet another unexpected idea.

Kai couldn't even begin to picture a dork like himself in a den full of social butterflies. Jun also looked ready to give Momoko a piece of her mind.

A bubbly person like Jun could easily party along with Reina and the girls, and also feel right at home doing a 100 Anisong Marathon with Kai. Kai definitely wasn't a 'party' kind of guy, though! He had no idea what songs were popular. All he could sing were songs from anime.

*Turn it down, Kai. No need to force yourself, Jun told him via eye contact.*

That bit of kindness was exactly why it was Kai's turn to impress her back, though. "Sounds good, Mihara. Let's go," he replied, which was the most amicable response he could give in this situation. He could ride out the partying with a little bit of patience.

"Kai..." Jun sighed as if she were calling him a big dummy. Then, her expression changed. "Thanks," she added, expressing her gratitude while beaming in his direction. *There* was the carefree, warm smile Kai loved so much.

Reina's reaction stood in stark contrast with Jun's. She also beamed in his direction and, quite apologetically, said, "I'm sorry, Ash." The vibe she was projecting implied she didn't mean for this to happen when she asked if they could eat together. Was she really a high school student...?

Kai found himself forcing a smile. "Fine by me, but what about you, Reina? You turned Matsuda and the other guys down when they asked you out. I'm a guy too, though... Won't I be in the way?" he pointed out.

"I only hate men who make it clear what they're really after," she stated. "You're Jun's friend, which makes you a friend of mine in a way. Or do I have it wrong?"

"I guess... not?" Kai wondered aloud, though he didn't take what she said at face value. Half of him was distrustful because Reina was a scary girl he couldn't quite read. But the other half was awed by the idea that the "queen" at the top of his class considered him a *friend*...!

"Kay! We're going right after school," Momoko confirmed. "See you then, Ash!"

"Got it. Mind if I follow you guys there?"

"Just so you know, true gentlemen pick up the tab~☆"

"You mean I'd be paying for everybody on my own?!" Kai asked incredulously.

"She's just joking, Kai," Jun warned. "Don't take everything Momoko says seriously."

"O-Oh, okay."

Things had taken a strange turn...



## Episode 003 - Is It Wrong to Want Some Sympathy from Partiers?

And so they all made their way from Asagi High School to the shopping district in front of the train station, where they entered the karaoke club. The lineup consisted of Jun, Reina, Momoko, and their other friends—all girls, for a total of nine. Some were from outside Class 2-A, but the whole group consisted of huge normies who knew each other through Reina. They'd all been in the same class as the Queen in middle school or their first year of high school.

Then there was Kai, the only guy in the group. The girls surrounded him on all sides on their way over there.

"Oh my gosh, Aaaaaash!"

"I've heard *so* many rumors about Myaakawa's nerd boyfriend but *never* thought he'd ever hang out with us!" He could tell they were actually trying to make him feel welcome, but he also sort of felt like a zoo exhibit.

"My name is K-a-i N-a-k-a-m-u-r-a! *Not* Ash!" he complained. They all just laughed, however. Nobody took him seriously.

"And Kai's *not* my boyfriend!" Jun added.

"We're just friends!" Try as they might to explain this, Jun and Kai may as well have been talking to a brick wall.

"Soooo, Ash. When you guys are all alone, how does Myaakawa baby you?" said a fair-skinned girl, latching onto Kai's arm so naturally it took him by surprise. Kai was excited to feel her chest against his arm, but also terrified, like a prey animal being squeezed to death by a snake. Knowing she wouldn't let go until he talked, he felt overwhelmed.

"Which part of her did you fall in love with? Her face? Her tits?" his classmate Shirayuki Saitou asked quite bluntly. Shirayuki was a redhead because her mom was American.

"Who takes charge when you bone?"

"Are you a missionary kinda guy?" one girl asked.

"Or cowgirl?" her twin piped up, immediately following up with another god-awful question. Kai's otaku brain led him to believe that older sisters looked best in ponytails, and that little sisters ought to have pigtails. She had a fairly short haircut instead (a dose of reality). They must absolutely hate getting mixed up.

But anyways, that was the situation Kai found himself in. Obviously, since the girls were part of Reina's inner circle, they were all cute, too—extremely so. A guy like Kishimoto would be in seventh heaven if he were in Kai's shoes, surrounded by cute girls all squealing over him. A huge virgin like Kai, however, found it incredibly daunting.

*Aren't they supposed to be really defensive around guys?!* Was he just hallucinating when he thought they were just like the Sakakibara gang of mean girls he'd heard all about? He looked to Reina for help.

"I'm sorry they're being so un-ladylike," she apologized. "They're just being candid with you, Ash."

"No need to be cautious around an otaku dweeb like Y-O-U☆ Don't get the wrong ideaAa!" Momoko snickered. Reina's way of putting it was easier to swallow, but Momoko was probably closer to the truth. That's what Kai chose to believe, anyway.

The girls wouldn't leave his side even after entering their room at the karaoke club. Kai found himself sandwiched between the fair-skinned girl and another girl on the couch seat. "A-Aren't you a little bit close?" he asked nervously.

"Ohh? Are you worried 'cause Myaakawa's looking?"

"Haha, is she going to take her jealousy out on you later or something?"

"Awww ♥"

Why was he suddenly so popular with the ladies?!

Kai knew better than to get the wrong idea. He could tell right away that they were just making passes at him to get a glimpse of something they rarely ever saw: Jun being jealous.

Jun also saw right through them. She was on the other side of the table directly across from Kai, sitting between Reina and Momoko. She fiddled with the straw in the drink she'd ordered, not flustered or paying any attention at all to the situation. "I'm happy for you, Kai. The ladies can't get enough of you. Now's your chance: maybe you'll get to rub up against Nocchi's rack in all the confusion," said Jun, spouting utter nonsense with a straight face.

The girls around Kai found this hilarious. "Myaakawa's a tough nut to crack!" one roared with laughter.

"Maybe she's chill 'cause they're like husband and wife already—anybody else getting those vibes?"

"Don't let her trick you; she's just bluffing!" said Nocchi, the girl to Kai's right. She was the only one taking it seriously. Nocchi was a tall, tan, sporty chick who was very clean cut. Kai didn't know this about her, but she was the team delinquent on the girl's volleyball team. Despite regularly skipping practice (like she was today), she had the build to be the team's ace spiker. Her tan was from all the other fun she had, not volleyball (since volleyball's an indoor sport, after all).

"She probably wouldn't even *care* if her husband cheated on her! Let's find out! I'm gonna let Ash give my boobs a squeeze!" Nocchi declared. Using both hands to lift up her uniform jacket, she quite generously revealed her chest. She was just as well-endowed as Jun.

*Is this what being a normie's like?! Good lord!* Kai was horrified. Was it okay to look at a girl's boobs as long as she was wearing a bra? Was she laid-back about it because it was just like wearing a swimsuit?

He covered his eyes before he could think twice about it and attempted to worship Nocchi's enormous rack from between his fingers. However, Nocchi's lewdness was nipped in the bud by a doting but absolutely furious Jun. "What are you, stupid?!" she yelled, stepping in with the karaoke remote controller.

All Kai got to see in the gaps between his fingers was the untanned, milky white stomach that lay beneath Nocchi's clothing and her belly button, which had a strangely erotic shape. Truly a sight for sore eyes.

The other girls were overjoyed at Jun's fierce reaction. "We finally got to see the lovely bride being jealous!!!" one of the twins howled.

"Man, that was \*chef's kiss\*!" the other twin cackled, even though neither of them actually thought she was all that jealous. They found Jun's scowling funny and teased her even more.

"Excuse me, that's enough. Why don't we do some singing?" Reina proposed. There's no telling how long they would've toyed with Kai and Jun if Reina hadn't exercised her keen ability to read the situation.

Thus began the karaoke session for the cool kids, by the cool kids.

Shirayuki sang the theme song from a popular Western movie with perfect English intonation. The twins performed a duet together, taking breaths at completely different times throughout the song. Nocchi did a Nogizaka (?) song with so much energy, it hurt Kai's ears. Reina almost sounded like a pro when she sang her ballad.

Meanwhile, Kai kept the upbeat atmosphere going by shaking maracas with the fair-skinned girl. Quite frankly, he'd already given up less than thirty minutes in.

*Th-This is SO BORING...* He couldn't think of any songs that weren't from an anime, much less sing them. Not that he had zero clue which songs were popular, to clarify. Kai vaguely knew the titles and the names of the artists. They played pop songs at his part-time job too, so he knew how the tunes went. He could at least take a peek around him and figure out when he needed to clap along. It wasn't all that fun "entertaining guests" at karaoke, though.

*Oh well. I knew what I was in for.* He was only tagging along so as not to make things awkward between Jun and her friend group. But then Kai took a long look at Jun and wondered, *Am I though? AM I okay with this?*

Although Jun was in the middle of singing a duet with Momoko... in stark contrast with her friend—who seemed to be having the time of her life—Jun was singing in a very tame, quiet way. Momoko was confidently insisting on doing things *her* way, ignoring the original melody here and there. Some might say she was rearranging the song, others might say she was completely out of tune.

And then there was Jun, perfectly matching Momoko's self-indulgent way of singing. When the song included back-up vocals, Jun went ahead and let Momoko be the star. She wasn't doing it because she was singing a duet with someone selfish like Momoko. Now that he'd been watching for a while, Kai noticed that she did this with anyone she sang a duet with. Conversely, she hadn't added a single song of her own accord, either.

*This isn't what Jun usually does at karaoke*, he realized. To go one step further—she didn't seem to be having any fun, period. *It was obvious I wouldn't have a good time... but isn't it odd that Jun is bored?* What was the point of hanging out with your friends if you didn't enjoy it?

Of course, being friends didn't necessarily mean you had all the same interests in common. Kai loved manga for example, as well as light novels and anime. Kishimoto, on the other hand, liked manga but wasn't really into light novels or anime, and he also loved chasing after girls. Manga was their common interest, so that's what they had fun talking about together.

Kai felt that *The Ryuo's Work is Never Done!* and *29 to JK* were masterpieces, and he had good intentions when he said, "It'd be a damn shame *not* to read this!" Still, he never forced anything on Kishimoto (although it did make him happy when they got manga adaptations). Kishimoto also understood Kai's personality and never asked him to be his wingman. This made being around him fun, which is why they were friends.

*Is Jun not like that, though? Or, are girls just not like that?*

He knew Jun went to karaoke with Reina pretty often. He figured she fit right in and had a great time at their cool kid karaoke parties. Had she actually just been forcing herself to hang out with them, even though she wasn't having any fun?

*If so, that doesn't sit right with me.* If that was the case, then shouldn't they have just played tanks at his house? Kai thought so.

Momoko and Jun finished up their song as Kai sat there, feeling discontent. Momoko smiled for a brief moment, looking quite proud of herself. Then, all of a sudden, her expression turned wicked like she'd just come up with some kind of prank. "Hey, Ash, how about you add a song? You haven't sung a single thing this whole time☆" she said to Kai, laying it on super thick. She was so self-centered, she didn't care that the next girl's song was about to start any second.

"Nah, I'm good. It's fun just listening to everybody sing," Kai replied, picking up on her motives. He dropped the volume of his voice low enough so only Momoko could hear him.

"D'aww, listen to you~ You just don't wanna get laughed at when everybody finds out you're tone deaf, am I right~?"

"Yup, hit the nail right on the head. I'm no match for you, Momo," he said. Let's leave it at that. He wasn't a good singer; that much was true.

"Awww come on, *sing* something~! You could do a duet with me! How's that sound~?" she continued to nag. "That's, like, a platinum-tier thing I'd

NEEEVER agree to with Matsuda, even if he begged me on his hands and knees~!"

"Nah, I said I'm good," Kai declined. "I don't know any songs well enough. I wouldn't be able to sing with you."

"No biggie, no biggie~☆ I know, like, SOOOO many songs~ I'll make it work! C'mon~ Pick any song you want, Ash~!"

*Go on. You think you could sing "Koi wa Chaos no Shimobenari" from Nyaruko: Crawling with Love if I added it to the queue?! Yeah right. You'd be flailing around crying "Gah! Eee!" trying to fake it! Kai scoffed to himself, though he held his tongue.*

Hobbies weren't something you forced onto somebody else. Sure, he may have been uncomfortable because Momoko had strong-armed him into being at a cool-kid karaoke party. But still, doing something off-putting like playing an anime song around people who wouldn't understand it would be a terrible disservice to a classic like "Koi wa Chaos no Shimobenari." He couldn't bear to do that. Kai read between the lines and humbly declined yet again.

"Ugghhh, what a buzzkill~ You're a reeeal downer, Ash~ A no-life loser~☆" Momoko sneered, which really hit a nerve with Kai.

Being called a "downer"—eh, whatever. He wasn't all that sophisticated compared to literal rays of sunshine like them, and he wasn't terribly masculine, either.

Kai couldn't agree with being called a "no-life loser," however. There was no denying that Kai could point to a friend group like Jun's as an example of normies with full social calendars, but that didn't make *him* a "no-life loser" by default. He happily filled his days with his otaku hobbies, and worked very hard at his part-time job to save up the funds to do so. He also went to events like Comiket pretty frequently. If *that* wasn't a happy and fulfilling life, what was?

Miffed, Kai ribbed her right back. "Mihara, do you really want to sing with me that bad? You're making the first move on a guy? What are you, horny? A ho?"

"WHA?! WHAT DID YOU SAY JUST NOW?!" Momoko immediately screeched, her eyes opening wide in rage. Kai thought it was kind of funny to see her cutesy act fail for a split second.

Momoko put the facade back up right away, in addition to smoothing out the roughness in her tone of voice. "O-Oh wow, Ash, that was mean~☆ I thought we were friends! Here I was just trying to help Myaakawa's boyfriend get along with everybody~" she sniffled. "And poor little Momoko got called a "ho" for all her trouble~☆"

"Yeah, yeah, but you've got your sights set on your friend's man. Which makes you a ho."

"I'm NOT **NOT** a HO!"

"So... just undateable then?"

"I'm not here to be judged, you nasty lil' party pooper~☆ Like I said, a pretty face is all a girl needs~! And I've always knocked 'em dead~"

"Okie dokie, ho."

"I AM *NOT*!!!"

Kai was just teasing, but Momoko was undeniably pissed. Her immediate reactions were a tiny bit amusing, though. The fair-skinned girl and the twins were sniggering like they'd just found a new toy.

*I see. Her face isn't the only reason why Annoying AF Momoko gets to be part of the cool girls' club. Kai had to hand it to them.*

Lil' Miss Short Fuse completely lost her temper. Momoko stood up and grabbed the hem of her skirt, yelling, "See if I've popped my cherry for your GODDAMN self! THAT'LL prove I'm not a ho!!!"

"ENOUGH—how unbecoming!" Reina thundered right away. Jun gave Momoko a silent bop on the head.

"Owww..." Momoko curled up into a ball holding her head, her anguish audible.

The girls all burst into laughter, holding their stomachs and kicking their legs around. A true feast for a man's eyes, since all of their skirts were so short. Kai looked down at the ground and stuck his straw into his mouth because he had to pretend like he saw nothing.

Which is to say, he witnessed plenty. If Kishimoto and Matsuda ever found out, they would kill him out of jealousy...



Their fundamentally boring cool-kid karaoke party stretched on in spite of that delightful incident. The party lasted all the way until the student discount hours ended at 9 p.m. Then they disbanded, splitting off into those heading home by foot, those heading to their part-time jobs on their bikes, and those taking the train.

Kai and Jun commuted to school by train. The nearest station to Asagi High School was Sakata, the terminal where the East-West and North-South lines in their prefecture crossed. Kai got off at Watarai, four stations north. He figured others would be headed home the same way, but Jun turned out to be the only one.

The two squeezed onto the full train, packed from all the people headed home during the evening rush hour. Jun stood right by the door, with Kai using himself as a human shield protecting her from being crushed by the other passengers. Even though they weren't boyfriend and girlfriend, they'd gotten pretty clever about stuff like this in the year that had passed since they met and started hanging out every day.

Kai propped himself up against the door by placing his arms on both sides of Jun and firmly planted his feet on the ground.

"Man, I'm beat today," Kai said jokingly. He didn't breathe a single word of all the suffering he'd gone through. "They're all so damn full of energy. It took everything I had to keep up."

"Haha... You did great." Jun thanked him for his efforts with a half-hearted smile.

That karaoke party basically amounted to a harem consisting of the hottest girls in his grade. If Kishimoto caught wind of this, he'd lose his mind: "What could you POSSIBLY be unsatisfied about, you ungrateful bastard?!" Truth be told, Kai's anxiety was through the roof.

"You really did me a solid back there. Thank you, Kai."

"I did? What do you mean?" he asked.

"They've been nagging me to introduce you for a while, to be honest," Jun explained. "They asked me to bring you along at least once. I guess they were all super curious because they thought you were my boyfriend."

"Ah..." Looking back on the way they'd pretended to welcome him, he completely understood.

"I knew you wouldn't be into it, so I came up with bogus reasons to turn them down. Then they all thought I was making a big deal about it, which made them even more curious. Honestly, it had been pretty hard to keep turning them down recently," she sighed. Jun had been desperately trying not to bother Kai, and he didn't even know it. He really couldn't have helped more when he offered to hang out with them.

"They should all be happy after today. Thank you SO much, Kai," Jun smiled weakly, making no effort to hide how exhausted she was. She might be used to keeping up with them, but she was still just a girl. Her baseline stamina was different from Kai's.

There was a short lull in the conversation from both sides. For the most part, they just faced each other in close proximity, silently being tossed around by the train. All they could hear was the dreary sound of the train car moving and the sluggish train announcements.

Jun squirmed around in her seat between Kai's outstretched arms, then took out her smartphone. He watched from above at point-blank range while she looked down at her screen. Despite the downtrodden look on her face, Jun was a downright catch. As he stared at her long, quivering eyelashes, Kai found himself absentmindedly wondering absurd things like, "She's nothing like my sister... What does she eat to get them so long?"

Kai didn't need to kill time on his phone. He never tired of looking at Jun's face; he could stare at it forever. Her face was exactly his type.

He couldn't spend forever looking at her, though. Just for the next four stations, or twelve minutes. This perfectly content silence, this stationary moment in time—where all the hubbub and din gave Kai the illusion that he was all alone with Jun—would come to an end. Then, Kai would get off the train and say goodbye to Jun, who got off at the next station.

All of a sudden, Kai noticed that she was humming to herself while using her phone. He strained his ears for her humming, frustrated that the sound from the train car was in the way.

It was “Onaji Sora no Shita de,” the theme song from the anime film *Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon? Arrow of Orion*, arranged to a slow tempo.

*Guess she didn't get her fill at karaoke.*

He could just tell.

*Guess I didn't sing a single song either.*

He sighed. His body, however, was already in motion.

The train arrived at Watarai—Kai's station—and the doors opened. Kai grabbed Jun by the arm, and they got off the train together.

“Huh?” Jun asked, dazed by the sudden turn of events.

*Makes sense.*

“How about an after party?” Kai asked gruffly, looking a bit embarrassed.







Jun immediately responded. "Sure!" Then she shot him a stunning smile, like all her exhaustion had been wiped away.

Kai and Jun left Watarai Station, then entered a tired little karaoke club perfectly suited for the tired little shopping center it was located in. The cost was a bit expensive for high schoolers like themselves, although they weren't about to bring it up.

After booking their time and placing the orders for their first drinks at the reception counter, Kai and Jun entered a cramped little room. The moment they walked in, Jun gave Kai a big hug from behind without warning. "Thank you SOOOOOOOO MUCH for everything you did for me today!" she squealed.

"Jun?!" Kai was perplexed by the spring in her step since she'd waited until no one was around to show it.

"Be honest: you're crazy stressed out from that, right?! Let's sing! Let's sing a BUNCH! That's really all we CAN do!!!" Jun had a very weird energy—she was overcome with emotion.

"W-Well, that's a bit of an overstatement." Kai's voice was climbing in pitch too. He could feel, FEEL, Jun's bounteous breasts pushing up against his back. "Your friends are all great people, Jun. I couldn't keep up the *whole* time, but I wouldn't say it stressed me out. Not at all."

"Be honest, though. You're not really a fan of girls like them, are you? But you'd never say anything bad about my friends," said Jun. "Even though Momoko and some of the other girls have been saying mean things about you behind your back on LINE!"

"Oh, is that why none of them went home with us? I could've gone without knowing that," Kai grumbled.

*Man, girls are scary*, he thought to himself. Regardless, he would never speak ill of Momoko and the others. He might not be enough of a smooth talker to say any friend of Jun's was a friend of his too. He could at least show them a bare-minimum level of manners, though. Kai didn't learn this from his parents or teachers. This nerd had manga, anime, and light novels to thank for that.

"Real talk, though: they're not *all* like Mihara, right?"

"Nope! Reina and Nocchi and some of the other girls usually turn on her and put a stop to it."

"See, I told you. You know so many nice people. I expected nothing less from your friends, Jun."

"That includes you too, Kai! Love you!"

When Jun said "love" just now, she was saying it the way friends would, not the way a man and a woman might say it to each other. Kai knew that was all she meant. He'd never get the wrong idea like the dense protagonists in light novels. But still... even though she only meant that she *liked* him and not *loved* him, Kai was speechless hearing her say this. It made him happy, pure and simple.

*I guess... it... Since she's my friend and all... Kai couldn't quite gather his thoughts.*

You just didn't say the word "love" like that to somebody's face, no matter how close a guy and a girl might be. You couldn't hug each other, or touch each other either.

┐(┐ ^o^ )┐ ←(Otherwise you'd see one of these dudes around.)

*Gotcha. There's some things she can only say because she's my friend, who just happens to be a girl. Kai decided to tell her how he felt without holding back, too.*

He definitely did provide a huge assist to Jun today. He'd gone through a lot of trouble for her. And though Kai had no intentions of reminding Jun that he'd done her a huge favor, he was glad she noticed his efforts and was grateful for what he'd done. It felt good: a very sincere, very human emotion. He was also really happy to have a friend like Jun who noticed those sorts of things. An insensitive person like Momoko would've been completely unaware.

That's why he wanted to make sure to tell her exactly how he felt.

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind... he stumbled over his words! "I-I lurve you, uh, too, Jun!" Wow, how lame was he...

"Yeah, I know you do!" Jun didn't even care. It made her that much happier, causing her to give him an even tighter hug. This then caused Jun's boobs to squish against him more, putting Kai's lower half in a tough spot. Then, they—

"My apologies, but we are *not* that kind of establishment," warned the female employee who came to bring them their drinks. Kai and Jun scattered, their cheeks bright red. Neither of them could look her in the eye.

To clear the awkward atmosphere, the two decided to go all out enjoying themselves at karaoke.

*"...Laaade~ ...eaVes my cheeeeSt~ ♪ ...arLet jelly, ...rcLe allll ...rooound me...~ ♪"* went Jun, singing her heart out to the opening theme song of the anime *World Break*. Although she wasn't quite a pro at articulation or pitch, she sang with passion and nailed the transitions between notes like an enka singer. Kai knew her singing style well.

He could tell she was having a good time. *Good, she better be!* Kai thought, finding her good mood contagious.

Not to be beat, Kai put in yet another song.

*"...oLd ooout myyy haan... eeLs like I... ooouCheD yooou~♪ BuT theeen~ ...reak yooou agaaain~♪"* A stellar tune he couldn't sing during their first round of karaoke, one that almost seemed to wipe away all his frustration. It didn't bother him that he was a worse singer than Jun. He also had to use falsetto because the song was by a female vocalist, but he didn't find it embarrassing. Why hold back around your best friend?

Since they were both otaku, it was anime song, anime song, anime medley, one after another. Top 40 hits? Not on their watch! Karaoke never felt so good!

*"...Rraria! ...pArkle aaaand shiiiiine ♪"*

*"...Rraria! sTroong, but fraaagile toooo ♪"*

*"...Ess ...e're ...eeeded oooout ♪"*

*"...Nn ...eaaaal ...ffe ♪"*

The pair got really excited singing duets because they had the same taste in anime music, too. They happily held hands, then raised their arms in the air like some kind of idol unit as they sang next to each other on the couch.

"I'm getting kinda thirsty!" Jun piped up.

"Me too!"

"Let's get a refill on our drinks!"

"Grapefruit for me, please!"

Jun picked up the internal phone next to her seat and ordered some additional drinks. They took a short break while they waited.

As luck would have it, Jun's phone rang. "It's from Nocchi," she noted.

"It's okay, take it."

"Nah, she'll text me on LINE later."

"No need to be modest," he replied.

Jun got a message in her LINE group chat while she and Kai were going back and forth. "Nocchi says she's sorry you got mixed up in all our nonsense. She says we won't do that anymore, and that next time it can just be the three of us," Jun said, skimming the message.

"O-Oh, okay..." Of course a social butterfly like Nocchi would say something like that. Being driven to make more friends wasn't all that unusual, although that didn't come naturally to Kai. "T-Tell her I'll think about it," he stammered.

"You'll *think about it*?" Jun asked, an evil grin spreading across her face. "But Nocchi's boobs are huge!"

"What does *that* have to do with it?!" he countered (and meant it).

"I was just joking," Jun giggled. Then she folded her arms as if to accentuate her own outstanding bust, holding her ample bosom up from below. Grinning again, she added, "I don't think Nocchi has me beat in that department, though."

"Wh-What do you mean? I don't get it," Kai said, playing innocent. Truth be told, he thought Jun was the clear winner too. Nocchi obviously had the advantage of being tall, but assuming that they were the same size, logically Jun far surpassed her in terms of proportions.

"So Kai, since you caught a peek of Nocchi's boobs..."

"She FLASHED me!" he objected.

"You've had a good look at mine too, yeah?"

"SORRY, that's just my male instinct kicking in. I'd be missing a few screws if I was capable of resisting!"

"Do you like boobs that much, Kai?"

"If you know a guy who *hates* boobs, I'd love to meet him!" Kai made the subject as broad as possible to avoid any personal responsibility.

"All right, all right, then..." Jun trailed off. All of a sudden, the mischievous smile on her face stiffened, and she averted her eyes.

"Hm?" Kai stared into her face, not sure what had caused the abrupt change in her behavior. Jun fidgeted in her seat to avoid his gaze.

"D-Do you want to... touch my boobs?"

"...Wha?"

"I-I'm saying, if you like boobs so much, then I'll let you touch mine!"

"WHAAAAAAT?!" The idea was so shocking, he let out a hysterical cry. "What are you *thinking*, Jun?!"

"B-Because we're friends...?"

"You let your friends touch your boobs?!" Kai asked incredulously.

"I-It's not that big of a deal!" she huffed. "Plus, up until now my friends have *all* said we should let each other touch at least *once* if they're curious."

"That's between girls, though! It's a TOTALLY different story when you're talking about a *guy* friend!"

"Y-You're my only guy friend, though, Kai! You're special!" Jun yelled, beet red all the way down to her neck. *Why say it if it embarrasses you that much? Now I'M embarrassed too!* Kai thought, flustered. Maybe she felt like it was a competition between her and Nocchi, who tried to get him to touch her boobs earlier? Or was it simply her way of paying him back for today?

*No no no no no NO. I CAN'T...* Kai wasn't sure what face to make.

Jun, on the other hand, was now being quite blunt to mask her shame. "S-So? How about it?" she demanded.

"...Let me think about it for a little bit."

"*Think about it?*" Jun inquired, another evil grin spreading across her still flushed cheeks.

*Do I rub them, or do I NOT rub them? That is the question,* Kai pondered, struggling with his adolescent conundrum. To be quite frank, he *did* want to. He'd love to rub them for an hour if he could, until he'd gotten his fill.

But, he wondered, should he really trust what Jun said? If he touched her boobs for five minutes, wouldn't she treat him with contempt and say something like, "I didn't think you'd take it seriously"? Would he be in the clear if he only did it for three minutes? Should he avoid being greedy and just limit himself to thirty seconds? No, the safest thing to do would be to not touch them at all.

No matter how hard he racked his brain, he couldn't come up with an answer! *What is this game of chicken we're playing... Dammit!*

"Hngh..." Kai's right hand wobbled aimlessly. A faithful depiction of the turmoil in his heart.

Jun watched attentively, a somewhat nervous expression on her face. She froze every time Kai's right hand moved in her direction and went

“Hrmm...” looking unsatisfied. A faithful depiction of how complex a girl’s heart could be, something Kai simply didn’t understand. At any rate, Jun sat there with bated breath and rosy red cheeks, waiting for Kai’s answer—for Kai to make his move.

Finally, Kai’s right hand stopped dead in its tracks. He’d made up his mind. Slowly, he reached out toward Jun’s voluptuous boobs...!

*Can’t fight my male instincts!!!!*

For the very first time in his life! He was steadfastly determined! To touch! TOUCH! A girl’s chest! Would it be soft? Would it be bouncy? Would his heart race non-stop? Would he be able to directly feel Jun’s heart racing in his hand?

“O-Okay then, with your permission, I’m going to touch your boobs. As your friend.”

“Y-Yes, please feel free. Since we’re friends.”

The two were so nervous, they’d both become polite for no reason. Jun was still sitting on the couch without attempting to wriggle away, so Kai moved his right hand toward Jun’s left breast and—

“Excuse me... We are NOT *that* kind of establishment...” warned the female employee who came to bring them their drinks the moment Kai made his move. Kai immediately leapt away, landing on the very end of the couch a good distance away from Jun. He whistled like nothing had happened at all. Despite the employee’s icy-cold, critical stare, he continued to whistle like an innocent bystander.

The employee said nothing else. She set the drinks down with a conspicuous sigh and then exited the room.

Kai was extremely relieved. Afterwards, Jun burst into laughter.

“Wh-What?” he asked.

“The way you moved just now was WILD. You noped out of there, sitting down like freaking Zeppeli!” she cracked up.

“All men become Ripple users when they find themselves in a do-or-die crisis.”

“You really had your back up against the wall there, huh?”

After cracking a few jokes, the two had a good belly laugh together. Even though things had gotten a hair erotic just now over whether or not he’d touch her boobs, their laughter completely swept it all away.

Jun and Kai sat happily side by side, quenching their thirsts. “Wanna do a duet or something with me, Kai?”

“How about ‘Koi wa Chaos no Shimobenari’?” he suggested.

“Man, that’s a throwback! Nice choice, though.” Jun used the remote and, of course, chose the version that came with footage from the anime. Kai and Jun sang enthusiastically with Nyaruko rampaging on the TV screen.

Nothing beats singing anime songs at karaoke!

## Episode 004: A Student Otaku's Work is Never Done!

The next day, on the way to school.

Every morning, one of the teachers stands before Asagi High School's front gates. The rules here might be lenient, but someone has to round up the students who think that leniency extends to what they can wear or when they can arrive.

And on that morning, the duty fell to a newly hired social studies teacher. Kai wasn't too familiar with him given that he taught first-year classes, but he did know that he'd made quite the splash among the students.

He was young at 29 years old, and—to be blunt—was quite handsome. He looked like the kind of slender-faced gentleman who came right out of a shoujo manga. Naturally, he was all the rage among the girls. Kai had spotted him surrounded by a squealing entourage plenty of times around the school.

This morning was no different. The schoolgirls all told him, "Good morning, Prince!" or "Looking good, Royalteach!" as they lingered around the gates and crowded around him. And not just the first-years—plenty of older girls joined in as well.

Incidentally, "Prince" wasn't a nickname granted in deference to the appearance he was blessed with. His first name was written with the characters for "*Ouji*," meaning "Prince." Except it was pronounced as the English word "Prince." Yes, really. Being a fellow bearer of a ridiculous name, Kai could sympathize. If anything, that particular brand of silliness must have been even rarer in his teacher's generation. The level of shame Kai had suffered must be nothing compared to what he went through. Not that Kai particularly cared.

As Kai crossed the gate, Mr. Royalteach looked up from the girls he was cheerfully chatting up to throw an amicable "Morning!" his way. Kai did his best to return the gesture with a cordial "Good morning" of his own.

You'd think being such a hit with the girls would draw the ire of the boys, but that friendliness of his seemed to be the trick to ensure it never did. Despite his heartthrob appearance, he'd often jump at the chance to chat about the hit manga and video games of the moment without a hint of pretension. And Mr. Prince was dependable, to boot. If you had the slightest concern and needed someone to talk to, he'd give you his full attention.

But he could still be an airhead at times—he apparently drifted from his curriculum fairly often to chitchat or tell stories about how hopelessly whipped he is by his wife. As a result, he was often the butt of 'Wifezilla' jokes among the first year boys, which probably made the dashing Mr. Royalteach a bit easier to warm up to.



And those were just the rumors that made it to the ears of someone as out of the loop as Kai, which spoke to just how popular this teacher was. Asagi High had no shortage of unique teachers—perhaps due to being a private school—but this guy was already in a league of his own.

*Talking to a teacher about manga sounds like it'd be neat.*

Kai proceeded to the school building with a bit of disappointment that Mr. Royalteach couldn't have been a second-year teacher instead.

When Kai reached the shoe lockers, he found Reina putting on her indoor slippers. Kai couldn't help but remember that yesterday, when Momoko and the others had a field day with him in their group chat, Reina was one of the girls trying to put a stop to it. Surely a pleasantry or two wouldn't hurt, right?

"Morning, Fujisawa!" Kai said, greeting her with vigor.

That got Reina's attention. She slowly turned to face Kai. He saw that her morning makeup was applied perfectly—her lovely face was eye-catching, yet not so garish as to harm its dignity. The eyes under her bewitchingly sensual eyelashes met his...

"Tch."

And for some reason, she immediately clicked her tongue. Loudly, at that. Her response was dripping with animosity.

She only gave Kai a glance before leaving him behind. She looked at him as though he were a bag of rotting garbage. The ferocity was enough to give him a knot in his stomach.

"Wh-Whoa. What was that for?"

Kai scrambled to catch up to her.

*Was she faking it when she said a friend of Jun's was a friend of hers?*

Unlike Momoko, Reina treated him with kindness all day yesterday. At least on the surface. And yet today, she was pulling a 180. Kai felt he had to know what had gotten into her.

Well... he probably wouldn't have worked up the courage to do so had it been anyone else. But this was Jun's friend. He didn't have to be buddies with her per se, but being enemies would risk getting Jun caught in the middle. When that risk came to mind, his legs moved into action on their own.

"Did I... do something to offend you?"

Kai caught up to Reina's side and asked in a hushed voice.

"..."

But Reina stuck to her silent treatment. She wouldn't even look at him. The woman who ruled from the top of the class's food chain—if not the top of the entire school's—wore a suit of frigid armor that rejected all advances. Kai could feel his courage shriveling up.

But he didn't give up. Jun's friendship gave him strength.

"C'mon, say something!"

"...I'd prefer you simply take the hint, but I don't want to speak to you again. Got it?"

Reina clicked her tongue yet again. She kept her pace quick and her gaze forward-facing.

Kai matched her speed as they walked down the hallway and explained, "It's kinda rough to be ignored by someone without even being told why, you know."

"I'd rather not get on Jun's bad side by insulting her boyfriend."

"Where'd that come from?!"

"There's a limit to what dimwittedness can excuse, and I'll have you know that men who make women repeat themselves are far past it."

Reina wouldn't give Kai so much as a foothold, but he still dug in and kept trying. Denying that he was Jun's boyfriend was getting a bit repetitive though, so he let that one slide and asked, "I won't tell Jun, so go ahead and be honest. What about me bothers you so much?"

"You are *one* dense man!"

Reina, clearly annoyed, stopped dead in her tracks. She finally faced him... and unleashed the fearsome aura of a yakuza's woman as she glared at him with all the hostility she could muster.

Kai wasn't maintaining his composure against that. He flinched a little. Reina was so imposing that Kai felt he deserved a medal for not running for his life.

She continued in a tone that sent shivers down his spine, "Very well, I'll make myself perfectly clear. What were you thinking yesterday at karaoke?"

"What was I... Did I do anything in particular?"

"You're not even *conscious* of it? You acted like you were bored out of your skull from start to finish! You must have been *trying* to infuriate me!"

Kai was left stumbling for words at Reina's criticism. He didn't need to think it through to feel in his soul that she was right on the mark.

Reina's barrage of beratement continued.

"Do you have any idea how hard everyone had to work to not let you completely ruin the mood?! You wouldn't cooperate a bit! Even Momoko tried to be nice and sing a duet with you, but you turned her down."

"I can't tell with her! How am I supposed to know she's being nice when every word out of her mouth is an insult?"

"...Fair enough. That one's on Momoko."

Reina retracted her last point. No matter how much she may have despised Kai, she wouldn't go so far as to twist the facts to express it. And Kai knew that this queen was a fair ruler; that's what gave her words the weight that made them hard to shake off.

"Couldn't you have at least sucked it up for a song or two?"

"...What do you want from me? I don't know any popular songs."

"Then just sing the songs you like."

"Are you kidding? Letting me sing anime songs is what would've *really* killed your mood!"

"Don't make assumptions about me. I watched *Precure* as a kid."

"You expect a *man* to sing *Precure*?!?!?!?"

In front a bunch of fashionable girls he'd practically just met? That's too tall of an order.

"Well, I like *Castle in the Sky* and *Totoro* when they come on TV."

"Yeah, gotta hand it to Ghibli."

Kai sighed, half in exasperation.

*See? I knew it.*

No matter what excuses they gave, a non-otaku could never understand the ways of the otaku. It wasn't a bad thing; after all, Kai didn't understand partier culture, and he had no desire to. That's what let people stay out of each other's way. There was nothing wrong with that, as there's nothing more boorish than forcing each of your hobbies onto everyone you meet. That was Kai's policy.

"Look, we live in different worlds. I knew it from the start. Your friends and I aren't gonna have a fun time at karaoke together. I had a feeling it'd turn out this way, and believe me, I wasn't surprised!"

"You've got some nerve acting like you're the victim here. Did you really look at Jun yesterday and think nothing of it? She *is* your girlfriend, isn't she?"

"Oh, I thought something all right! And it's that she looked like she'd rather have been anywhere but there!"

"And whose fault do you think that was?"

"She was just trying to please you girls, wasn't she?"

Thinking it was now his turn to hit right on the mark, Kai went on the offensive.

"Hah!"

But Reina just sneered at him. Kai's biting rhetoric bit nothing but air.

"You really don't get it. Jun was trying to please *you*."

"...What?"

"She tried as hard as Momoko... no, even more. Jun stuck to singing backup so everyone else could have fun just in case your presence made anyone feel awkward. She's normally the life of the party at karaoke. Did you really not know that?"

*...Yeah, I knew that.*

This second blow was enough to make his knees rattle. Jun was under that much stress, and yet Kai thought that *he* was the one bending over backwards to help *her*...

"You really are pathetic!"

Reina raised her voice, a first for her.

"You did nothing but embarrass Jun. Do you have any clue how much shit everyone talked about you the moment you were gone?"

"...Yeah, I do."

"But do you realize that insulting you equates to insulting Jun? Can you think it through that far?"

"..."

Kai hung his head in silence. He was humiliated. Anyone would after being told off like that.

But Kai had no easy way to defend himself. All he could do was grit his teeth.

"... So, what the heck *should* I have done?"

What the heck should he have done to avoid embarrassing Jun? Was he supposed to have parted his head off to fit in with those extreme extroverts? He wasn't gonna master that skill at the drop of a hat. That was asking too much.

"Isn't it obvious?"

Reina gave a haughty "Hmph," as though she were treating him like an idiot for not understanding something so simple.

"You're working from the wrong assumption. The way I see it, you never should have come to karaoke to begin with."

The third blow rocked Kai's balance.

"No matter what Momoko demanded, you could've just politely declined. You remember what happened at lunch, don't you? Jun was trying to get you to turn her down. And I certainly didn't invite you. Yet *you* had to show off and stick up for your girlfriend by saying you'd come. Which is fine in itself. Men like to show off; there's nothing wrong with that. Even I was impressed, hoping against hope that you'd amount to something... but I clearly overestimated you."

Reina's every word made Kai grit his teeth tighter. To a painful extent.

"Do you get it now? If you want to go to Rome, then you do as the Romans do. If you can't, then stay home. I think that's a fine policy to follow. I'm not so boorish as to force each of my hobbies onto everyone I meet, and you knew we lived in different worlds to begin with, so we could have just stayed out of each other's way. Or am I just being crazy here?"

"You're... not crazy..."

Kai was completely defeated. He was mercilessly put in his place. Reina continued looking down on Kai as he sulked before giving one final warning.

"A man like you doesn't deserve Jun. I refuse to accept you. But I can accept that Jun has her own tastes, so I'll keep my mouth shut and stay out of it. Like I told you, I'd rather not get on Jun's bad side, so feel free to treat her the way you always have. Just don't talk to me when you don't have to, got it? Looking at your face is enough to make me sick."

That was enough to make Kai's gaze shoot up. His body moved before his brain thought it through. There was something in there that he just couldn't let slide. Something he couldn't accept.

But he didn't know what it was. His mind went nowhere. So he just glared at Reina, hoping for a retort that never came.

Reina was completely unfazed. She waited for a bit, but once it was clear that Kai had nothing to say in his defense, she didn't hesitate to leave him behind for good.

"Goodbye... Nakamura."

Those were some tough parting words to bear. And to think, he had spent so much time telling her not to call him "Ash." Wasn't "Nakamura" supposed to be the name he wanted to hear?



Whether he accepted it or not, Kai's classes continued. And with his mind still in a haze, the school day ended.

He had his part-time job that day. Indulging in his otaku hobbies required a war chest, so he worked twice a week to fill it. The schedule of his shifts depended on the day; on school days like this, he'd work for five hours from five in the evening to ten at night. He even got a paid fifteen-minute break in the middle, so it was a pretty above-board gig.

The place? Beaver Video Rental, store #4. It was a local, long-established chain that had expanded to eight stores around Sakata. Competing stores might have been forced into submission before the might of the Tsu\*\*ya Empire, but Beaver kept up the fight through its unique brand of guerilla warfare. Yet despite their blow-for-blow battles, it found itself in an age where the fast-approaching tides of online streaming services threatened the rental industry as a whole.

Beaver hung on for so long by having each store double down on a particular specialty. For store #4, that specialty was anime, *tokusatsu*, and the occasional movie that otaku would find interesting—typically live-action adaptations of manga or Marvel movies. They offered this content via a wide selection of Blu-rays, DVDs, and CDs.

That factor tipped the scales in Kai's decision to work there; the employee discount was a lifesaver. Jun had fallen deep into the Netflix rabbit hole, but Kai was still a BD renter. Keeping track of which streaming service did or didn't have a particular anime was a pain, but he felt like it'd be a waste to subscribe to them all, so he couldn't bring himself to make the leap.

It was a typical weekday shift—not too busy, but not too dull. Kai spent two and a half hours ringing up customers. Kai had been working this job since he started high school, so it was second nature by now. A bit of a heavy heart wouldn't be enough to get in the way of his work.

Once his break came, he retreated to the break room in the back. Along with lockers and a water cooler, it had a table surrounded by four chairs, one of which Kai thrust his weary body upon.

Once he settled in...

"Good work, Nakamura."

A girl who had also entered the break room greeted him. She was a coworker who had a more charming appearance than the average person, as well as the somewhat obnoxious expression of someone who knew it.

Her name was Kotobuki Hotei. She was fifteen years old—a year younger than Kai—and had just started high school the other day. But unlike Kai, she went to a public high school in her neighborhood, so their relationship was just that of junior and senior coworkers.

And she was a newbie, too; she'd only been on the team for two months. Kotobuki said she wanted to put off working until she started high school, but being done with her entrance exams left her with so much free time in middle school that she figured she might as well take the plunge then. Beaver usually only accepted applicants who were in high school or above, but they did hire third-year middle schoolers who were in that particular scenario.

Since he was the closest to her age, Kai naturally ended up as Kotobuki's mentor. He called her "Kotobuki." He worried that using her first name might come off as being overly familiar, but the one time he tried her last name, she got mad and told him, "Hotei makes people think of Buddha, but that fatso's image clearly doesn't suit mine," so he never did it again.

At the moment, Kotobuki was in front of the sink.

"Shall I make you coffee?"

Her tone was noticeably rigid and lacking in vigor, but still polite.

"Oh no, I'm fine. Carry on."

Kai changed his tone to match hers in response.

"Oh, it's no trouble. I'm making some for myself anyhow."

"Is that so? In that case, don't mind if I do."

"You simply could have agreed from the start."

"Indeed, I'll mind my manners in the future."

Their back-and-forth might have seemed like a parody, but Kotobuki absolutely wasn't playing around. That was how she spoke to everyone at work, employee and customer alike. She was undeniably obnoxious, but she also had the emotional stability of a wet paper bag.

People who are a bad fit for the service industry tend to be spectacularly bad fits, and Kotobuki was no exception. When she first started, her shifts were one nervous breakdown after another. Kotobuki wasn't used to polite speech, so she fell apart constantly. Kai wanted to help her get used to it, so he kept her conversations with her as polite as possible, even though she was younger and newer.

Which brings us to the present. Two months into her employment, Kotobuki was still talking to customers like a robot. As such, Kai continued keeping his speech polite. He'd started to enjoy their curious conversational style.

Kotobuki placed two cups of instant coffee on the table and sat across from Kai. They began a chat that, as usual, would consume much of their allotted break time.

"Did you complete your viewing of *ACCA* yet, Nakamura?"

"Why, yes. I found it to be a splendid work of animation. I've already procured the manga it was adapted from."

"By all means, tell me your impressions in detail."

"I'd very much like to debate whether Lotta and Nino's relationship shall grow into a romantic one. It's quite the shame that I missed the chance to watch as it aired."

"Ah yes, I suppose you're late to the party. Writing off that which you haven't tried is a bad habit of yours," said Kotobuki.

"On the contrary, my palette is quite varied. But the world simply has too much anime I must watch, manga I must read, and games I must play."

"So, you have trouble remaining faithful."

"Heaven forbid. Unlike you, I'm not capable of viewing every anime out there," said Kai.

"Heaven forbid, neither am I. I merely watch the first episode of every show in a season and decide what to continue from there."

"Is that so? That's quite the shock."

"I believe this warrants some respect, no?"

Kotobuki looked triumphant. She may act arrogant and get on everyone's nerves, but it was hard to hate her after seeing the many insecurities she attempted to hide.







For example, take the coffee she just made. Kai took the cup to his lips and tasted its contents. It was nothing more than instant coffee, but it spread across his tongue more than he expected.

"Did you put in more cream and sugar than usual?"

Kai didn't even ask Kotobuki to put any in, but it was just the amount he needed.

"Well, you appear more tired than usual."

Kotobuki's answer sounded nonchalant, but she was visibly so embarrassed that she couldn't even make eye contact. She wasn't great at admitting her feelings.

"I see. You have my sincerest gratitude."

That's why Kai made his feelings bare to an almost insulting extent. Kotobuki averted her gaze even further and started fidgeting.

Kai knew how she worked. She was considerate despite her obnoxious demeanor because she was timid. She always kept an eye on the moods of everyone around her. Kai found her far too endearing to bring himself to hate her.

"Nakamura, you appear to be troubled today."

With her gaze still averted, Kotobuki changed the subject. She had tried to avoid bringing it up, but the flow of the conversation seemed to push her to take the risk.

"If you'd like, I'd be willing to lend an ear."

"Would that be all right with you?"

"I just told you that it's no trouble, did I not?"

"Wait, that's what you were referring to? ...Well, sure. But it's nothing major."

Kai reverted to a casual tone and explained what had happened without naming names. He didn't expect a solution. At best, he thought that complaining to someone about it might get it off his mind. But to his surprise...

"I can understand where that classmate who scolded you is coming from. However, I think I have an idea of where your own misgivings may be coming from."

Kotobuki looked Kai straight in the eyes as she made her encouraging declaration.

"Oh my, is that so?"

"Why yes, of course."

"Would you be so kind as to impart your wisdom?"

"Consider it imparted."

Kotobuki was back to her obnoxious, but still loveable self.

"This classmate must be mistaking you and that girl friend of yours for lovers. Yet you claim that the two of you are merely friends. Perhaps that difference in perception is the source of your discord?"

“...Ah!”

Suddenly, the pieces fell into place. Kotobuki continued with no regard to Kai’s astonishment.

“With lovers, it’s common to judge whether a boyfriend is suitable or not. However, there’s no such requirement for friends.”

That explained why Reina lost her temper and said that a man like him didn’t deserve Jun. Conversely, Kai couldn’t understand why he suddenly needed to listen to someone talk down to him about ‘approval’ when he just wanted to spend time with his best friend.

“This girlfriend-boyfriend stuff is all a pain in the neck...”

Kai let a gripe slip out. He said it almost unconsciously... which he took to mean that he might really feel that way deep down.

*She’s really making me think...*

Kai gave a deep sigh and closed his eyes. He was no exception to society’s expectations for him. He had the vague desire for a girlfriend. But when he thought about it, having a girlfriend seemed like it’d cause more problems than it’d solve. If you had to question whether you were suitable or deserving of someone over every little thing, you’d never reach the end of it.

Let’s say Kai worked for Reina’s approval. He’d have to pay attention to his fashion in order to be worthy of Jun’s looks. He’d need to learn how to blend in among normies on top of getting more real-world hobbies to avoid embarrassing Jun. Maybe he’d be better off hiding his otaku hobbies entirely.

*C’mon, that’s just crazy talk!*

But if they were just friends? They could hang out every day, play games, and talk about whatever. They wouldn’t need anything other than having fun. That was enough for Kai. He wouldn’t have it any other way.

*Jun isn’t my girlfriend; she’s just a friend. And I’m fine with that. No, I’m happy with that.*

Was Kai alone in thinking that the unreserved relationship they had now was far better than a romantic one? Or was he just being a sour grape over what he didn’t have?

It really made Kai see things in a new light. He let out another sigh, opened his eyes, and gave his thanks to the coworker sitting on the other end of the table.

“I feel a lot better now that I’ve got my head sorted out. And I have you to thank for it.”

“Perhaps you’d consider repaying this kindness?”

“I’ll think of something later.”

“I eagerly await it.”

“But yeah, it figures you’d know what to do.”

"Know what now?"

"Well, you understand how women think."

"But of course. Who do you think I am?"

Kotobuki beamed with pride. Obnoxious as she was, Kai still couldn't hate her. He just had to chuckle and admit she gave him the help he needed.

"Incidentally," Kotobuki interjected, "I have some concerns over our own differences in perception."

"If I could be so bold as to inquire."

"Could Lotta's love interest not be Rail instead of Nino?"

She was continuing the discussion about the anime they started with. Her tone was dead serious, almost daring him to defend. Kai answered in kind.

"You must be joking. Surely, Lotta deserves better than some lowly grunt."

"Quite the harsh judgment, considering that sounds awfully close to what that fearsome classmate told you before."

"I believe it was you who said that lovers need to judge who is suitable or not. In that sense, I'm in no position to disagree with her."

"I see. But is Rail not a dependable young man who saved Lotta from danger?"

"I suggest you don't forget that the one who really saved Lotta was the chief."

"Still, I believe Nino's age is a bit far removed from hers..."

"Lotta's a strong-willed girl who harbors a dangerous secret. Nobody besides Nino could hope to handle her. And when you consider the themes of the story..."

"However, I must say—"

"Oh no, let me make clear—"

They flared up furiously over their anime debate. Kai could always count on Kotobuki for a serious discussion, even when he missed the original airing and everyone else moved on to newer shows. It was so much fun that Kai could hardly help himself. A fifteen-minute break was just too short for them to talk everything through.

## Episode 005: I've Been Hanging with Jun for One Year and Maxed Out a Lot of Stuff

The weekend.

Kai was watching a Let's Play video in his bedroom on the second floor of his home.

Well, calling it a "Let's Play" might be stretching the "Let's" part a bit. The video's uploader, jyunjyun1203, was the silent type—he didn't speak a word of commentary or even use a Vocaloid narrator in his videos, instead opting for just the occasional pop-up text. His channel, originally created with a focus on the *Monster Hunter* series, was updated with video after video of godlike play.

Kai became a fan back when JJ (lovingly pronounced "Jay-Two") started uploading in the *MH4U* days, and he'd been spellbound by his expert technique for the five years or so since then.

Sometimes Kai would watch the same video on repeat, and other times he would go wild over a new video he'd been eagerly anticipating. It had been a while since *MHW* came out, so it was losing steam among the big streamers (though the release of its expansion, *Iceborne*, had put some coals on the fire about five months ago). However, JJ would still provide the content Kai craved. It wouldn't come often or with any notice, but it would come.

Right now, Kai was riveted by the Arch-Tempered Lunastra solo hunt video that JJ uploaded on Friday night. And when the Arch-Tempered Teostra joined the fray before JJ dispatched it with flair? Kai got hyped. His eyes were glued to the screen of the old laptop opened on top of his desk.

Meanwhile, Jun had come to hang out early in the afternoon. She was lazing around on Kai's bed, engrossed in a selection from Kai's library. Her posture was relaxed, with one of Kai's pillows under her belly. Maximum comfy mode had been engaged.

If she kept that up, Kai would have trouble sleeping since her scent would be rubbed into his pillow... but for obvious reasons, he couldn't quite tell her to stop. He'd be far too embarrassed to tell the truth if she asked why.

"Whoooooa, Dr. Keine is freakin' scary... and so freakin' cool..."

Jun, still lying on her stomach, couldn't keep herself from lifting her shins and kicking against the bed. She had her nose buried deep in the pages as she wriggled in sheer exhilaration.

"I know; you don't see that one coming. She owns."

Kai's video was just wrapping up, so he gave a response to Jun's reactions.

"But personally, I'm a fan of the Merchant, Masato. There's nothing that guy can't pull off."

"Totally. Men with a whiff of danger are so cool!"

As they continued talking about their manga impressions, Kai stood up from his chair. He *casually* strolled over to his bookshelf and *casually* pulled out a paperback copy of *High School Prodigies Have It Easy Even In Another World!* This was the light novel that the manga currently giving Jun the shivers was based on.

He *casually* sat down on the side of the bed and *casually* suggested, "You *know*, if you'd like to pick up where the manga adaptation leaves off, you can always read the novels."

"I'll pass on any word-having books."

"Well, the same author wrote *Chivalry of a Failed Knight*, which is pretty sick!"

"I watched all of the *Chivalry* anime, and I own every volume of the manga, so..."

"You can learn how the Seven Stars Battle Festival ends if you read the novels, though."

"Words make me sleepy, so I'll pass."

"Guh..."

Jun lay down the whole time and didn't even look at Kai, yet still brought him to rue his fate.

Jun was like Kishimoto and Satou in that she loved manga but never read light novels. They wouldn't get excited over what happened after the "Love Hunter Ringo" chapter or the "Dragon Fanging His Ittou Shura at Night" scene with Kai.

Only on the rare occasions where Jun was desperate to find out what happened after a light novel-based anime ended, and only on the rare occasions where the manga adaptation also hadn't caught up, would she reach for the source material. And even then, Kai got radio silence on her feedback after one or two volumes. She had absolutely zero reading endurance.

Kai really wished he had more light novel friends!

*Well, she is who she is. I don't want to force my hobbies onto her.*

Kai regretfully returned *High School Prodigies Have It Easy Even In Another World!* to his bookshelf. Until the day arrived when Kai found another light novel he could suggest to Jun, he would return to the veil of the shadows, awaiting his chance as a tiger awaits his prey.

With his grand scheme returned to the backburner, Kai sat back down on the edge of the bed. Jun once again immersed herself in the manga version of *High School Prodigies*. Kai knew that this otaku friend of his was the type to read her favorite scenes over and over immediately after finishing a volume. That was fine. All well and good. Except...

*Earth to Jun, I can see your panties again...*

It must have happened when she was kicking her legs around earlier. Her already short skirt was... flipped up. Everything from the pure white cloth that's never supposed to be seen to the meticulous lace embroidery seemed to beg its viewer to shout, "I see London, I see France!"

*Well, she is who she is.*

Kai was about to warn her before he thought twice. Jun was so enthralled in her reading that she didn't seem to notice her disheveled clothing. If Kai were to point it out, he'd just be going out of his way to embarrass her. But if he were to *casually* straighten out her skirt and pretend he never saw a thing, that would solve everything, wouldn't it?

*Yeah, let's do that.*

Kai, like a perfect gentleman, reached slowly and softly toward the hem of Jun's skirt. But halfway through, he had a startling realization.

*If she notices me as I pinch her skirt, won't I be the one who'll die of embarrassment?*

Perhaps it'd be wise to abort the operation.

...Or so Kai considered, but he shook those doubts off and convinced himself that there was no turning back after coming this far. He just had to complete his mission perfectly. Just conceal his presence, like a ninja. The gentleman ninja, Nakamura. Kai Nakamura.

*Carefully... Carefully...*

He stealthily pinched the hem of her skirt.

At that moment, Jun twitched and tensed her body.

*Forgive meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!*

Kai shrieked silently.

Yep, of course she'd notice that. Yep, of course she wouldn't overlook her skirt getting grabbed.

Kai blurted his apologies and regrets in his head... until he realized again. Jun seemed liked she'd tensed up unconsciously. Yet she still said nothing. Her gaze was still fixed on her *High School Prodigies* manga.

*Wait, did she not catch that?*

Was she just tensing up in response to a twist in the manga? Did that volume even have any twists worth tensing up over? Either way, if Jun didn't notice, then Kai was in the clear. He carefully lowered her skirt and straightened it out. Mission complete.

Having snatched victory from the jaws of defeat, Kai wiped the sweat he'd worked up from his brow. He savored the satisfaction of having done a good deed. He took pride in his sense of noblesse oblige, the duty of any gentleman.

Which was why *he* was the one who didn't notice two important things...

One, Jun's tension hadn't faded. And two, she was now beet-red up to her ears.

Once 3 p.m. came around, Kai's mom brought up some freshly purchased strawberries as a snack. She carried a plate that was piled high with them all the way to Kai's room on the second floor... and then stayed to help them clear it off as she chatted with Jun.

"You've *got* to hear this one, Jun! So this idiot son of mine—"

"C'mon mother, be a bit kinder to him. On the last quiz we took, Kai scored a—"

Yada yada, yada yada.

Kai's mother (age 39) engaged in unrestrained gossip that she insisted counted as "girl talk." It was an atmosphere that Kai, as her son, found more than a bit uncomfortable.

Well, she'd give them some peace and quiet after less than half an hour, so Kai wasn't going to make a fuss. But after she left, Jun asked Kai a question as they were deciding what game to play together.

"It's almost Golden Week, Kai. Whatcha doin' this year?"

"Not sure, but it doesn't look like we're having a family vacation."

Kai had an idea of what she had in mind based on everything she talked about with his mom, so he answered immediately. Incidentally, he heard that it was Miyakawa family tradition to go on a three-day, two-night vacation for GW every year.

"So, you're working *again* this year?"

Jun's followup question had a dash of criticism in its tone. Kai filled every day of his GW with work shifts last year, and she was clearly still holding that against him.

Beaver Video Rental was open 365 days a year. Not by request of the workers, mind you—they at least wanted time off for the major holidays like Golden Week, New Year's, and Obon. As a compromise, Beaver's owner offered bonus pay (3,000 yen per day) to anyone working during those periods.

This discovery led Kai through a rollercoaster of emotions. A daily bonus of 3,000 yen is huge to a high schooler. Massive, even. So, he let the fantasies go to his head as he applied to work for **every single day of GW**. And that was that.

"I'll, uh, take it a bit easier this time."

Kai gave his answer as he turned on his PS4 and sat down next to Jun on the bed.

He survived last year's eight straight days of mid-holiday work, sure, but it took its toll on his studies once the "vacation" ended. And, well, he wished he could've had some fun.

"I don't think I can get the whole week off, though. I bet everyone'll ask me to take their shifts."

"Do you *have* to take them?"



Jun pursed her lips at the implication that a long-distance trip might not be in the cards again.

"All of my seniors there have partners. As a bachelor, I kinda have to be considerate."

"Then how about I be your girlfriend just for the week?"

"?!?!?!?!"

"Kidding, but you should've seen your face."

Jun teased him with a mischievous sneer. She continued peering into his widened, dumbstruck eyes.

"A-Anyway, I owe them for all the help they give me!"

They were good people who cleaned up after Kai's many messes in his early days without so much as a complaint. If this was a way he could repay them, he'd gladly take the opportunity.

"Okay, fiiiine. You're so eager to please. It's cute that you are, though."

"C-Cute isn't a word you should use for a man!"

"Then how about you tell them no like a man?"

"Hewwo, I'm Kai the cutie-pie."

Kai put on his best falsetto mascot character impression. Jun patted his head to comfort him.

"But oh well, I get it. How about we at least hang out together if we find the time for it?"

Jun tossed her controller to the side as she collapsed back onto the bed.

"Speaking of jobs, do you not work?"

"Nope, not a bit. Well, more like I can't. My family's all, 'High schoolers have no business doing that' and 'If you've got time to work, you've got time to study' whenever it comes up."

"Ah, there are lots of families like that, yeah."

Times like these made Kai grateful that his family's parenting style was hands-off and valued personal responsibility.

"Though you sure seem like you've got deep pockets..." said Kai.

"What? I totally do not! I'm broke year-round!"

"Yeah, because you can't keep your spending habits in check, right?"

Kai lost count of how often he'd seen Jun blow her money on gacha 10-rolls only to scream in agony after coming up empty. Meanwhile, Kai played his mobile games as though their "free-to-play" taglines were a challenge.

"So, does your family just give you a huge allowance?" Kai had been curious about this for a while, and now seemed like a good opportunity to ask.

"Well, not exactly." Jun, apparently figuring it was nothing to hide, readily answered him. "I have four brothers who are a lot older than me."

"Huh, that many?" He had assumed she was the youngest of her siblings from the way she acted, but he didn't know how many there were or how old.

"And every single one is the doting type."

"They *all* have a sister complex?"

"They give me money just to compete with each other."

"And they're terminal cases, to boot..." Kai sighed, but he understood.  
"Honestly, I'm jealous..."

He wondered if his own sister could get a job already so she could spot him some cash every now and then. Then he too could buy 10-rolls without a care in the world...

*Okay, now we're being unrealistic.* His relationship with his sister wasn't on thin ice, but she'd never dote on him like that.

"Honestly, I'm jealous." So jealous that it bore repeating.

"Well, I won't blame you, but that means having to listen to them nag, you know? Like about how I better not find a boyfriend or anything."

"Y-You don't say..."

"And that's why I've never invited you to my place. I just know it'd be a headache. They'd definitely mistake you for a boyfriend. And then beat the crap out of you."

"Yeah, I'd prefer to keep my crap inside me..." Definitely not the kind of house Kai would want to chill at. "But that explains a lot."

Jun had spent so much time around Kai's house that she was practically part of the family. But Jun never introduced Kai to her family, so he had a feeling there was a reason behind it.

"So that's it, you're like the Miyakawa family's princess. I can see it."

"Oh, please. Don't laugh at me."

"Believe me, I'm not. But Jun, it's not like you're all that opposed to being the center of attention, right? Given they're your brothers, I bet they're all pretty boys."

"Oh, no way! None of them are all that hot!"

While still lying in bed, Jun denied the accusation and made an X with her arms.

"Is that so? Well, I *know* you can be pretty superficial. I *know* your standards are off the charts. And I *know* I haven't forgiven you for calling my Little War Office and Fox Waifu 'ugly.'"

"Huh? But they *are* ugly."

"You wanna take this outside?"

"How about you get your eyes checked first, huh? If you want beauty, you need to be on Catalanta's or Shuten's level."

"You've got that wrong! Nightingale and Tamamo and Atalanta and Shuten Douji are all cute!"

They had a quick spat over an incredibly frivolous subject. Kai, eventually noticing the futility of this digression, started thinking of a way to drop it and get back on track. Jun, on the other hand, felt a need to double down on her position.

"Boo, Kai! Boo, boo, boo, boo!"

Suddenly, she appeared to have a eureka moment.

"By the way, Kai, what *exactly* was it that made you think my brothers were pretty, anyway? What *exactly* did you mean by 'Given they're *my* brothers'?"

Jun rolled around on the bed as she taunted him with puppy-dog eyes.

"...Darn you."

"Could it be that you think my brothers and I look alike? Why, wouldn't that mean you think my brothers are pretty... because you think *I'm* pretty? Hmmmm?"

"Aw, shut it... You clearly don't need me to spell it out, so quit asking..."

"Well, well, well, so Kai thinks I'm pretty, eh?"

That mischievous sneer snuck up again, making Kai feel like he was being looked down upon. And she had to rub it in by laying her head on his lap, too.

Kai had to struggle not to keel over from the unimaginably pleasant weight placed upon his thighs. Ah, lying in the lap of a fair maiden may be the dream of any man, but to think that being the pillow for a girl could be so bittersweet!

"Okay, okay, I give. You got me. Uncle, uncle."

"Heh. You're cute when you're struggling."

"Okay, okay, you're pretty. You're a total hottie. You're the most beautiful girl I've laid eyes upon. The cutest girl in the world. A goddess among mortals."

"Huh? Uh, wha?"

"I'm admitting it. Your face is totally my type. A total bullseye on everything I look for. My platonic ideal."

"Whaaaaaaaaa?!"

Jun shouted in bewilderment. She turned red down to the collarbones peeking out from her blouse as her triumphant grin vanished. Her expression was now completely contorted. The girl whose teasing seemed so self-assured was shrinking back after just one move.

*... Well, shrinking back won't get her far when her head's on my lap. If anything, she's just wriggling into me.*

"...Is not something I'd ever say, but I wonder how you'd feel if I did. For reference, how do you feel right now?"

"Y-You're messing with me!"

"Heh, heh, heh. Fool ya once, shame on you!"

It was Kai's turn to sneer at the cute critter who had willingly hopped into his trap, putting herself in a position she couldn't retreat from.

"Kai, you jerk!"

Jun had finally sunk to sulking and digging her nails into Kai's thighs, but the spots she struck didn't hurt a bit!

"Bwahahah, you won't always get the upper hand against me!"

"Fine. I'll just go to bed. Right here. Right now."

"...Um?"

"I won't move no matter how bored you get or how quickly your legs fall asleep. Be a good pillow, now."

"Wha, wait..."

"Zzzzz."

"Don't pretend to fall asleep on me, dammit!"

Jun expressed her commitment to not moving a muscle as her face was buried between Kai's thighs. She was on the verge of using the weekend as an excuse to stay the entire night, but Kai did everything he could to walk her away from the brink.

Well, with that said...

Days like these might seem chaotic, but in the end, Kai couldn't deny that they were fun. A day off spent with Jun was like nothing else. No matter what Reina said, Kai had no intention of letting his best friend or their time together slip away. He was now more certain of that than ever.



But life doesn't always go the way we want.

It was the lunch break at the start of the school week. And a shocking development was about to throw Kai and Reina a curveball.

"Well, well, well, Ash. So you eat at the cafeteria too? Guess I'll tag along~☆"

And with that, the ever-annoying Momoko caught up to Kai before he made his way into the halls.

Kai found himself staring in disbelief.

"C'moon, eating alone is totally lame, so even eating with you is better than nothing! Besiiiiiiides, I'm in a *generous* kinda mood, y'know? And let's be real, Ash, I *knooooow* that getting to have lunch with me makes you wanna shed tears of joy, riiiiight? Ah, what a benevolent goddess I am!"

If she's a goddess, she's a Momokoddamn annoying one. Her ability to spout such nonsense left Kai at a loss for words.

However, the students around him made up for that as the entire class started gossiping among themselves. Why was the number 3 of the popular girls' group, specifically the one who was known for never clinging to boys, suddenly chatting up the most unremarkable, middle-of-the-road otaku in their class?

It was a mystery begging to be solved, and the fascination in that mystery spread through the class like wildfire. The students seemed to be showing some restraint, but their curiosity couldn't be concealed. They frequently glanced at the motionless Kai as Momoko tried to hurry him to lunch.

But some people in the class were more indignant at what they'd just heard than others. What's more, it wasn't Reina. It was Matsuda, Takeda, Umeda, and Fukuda—the gang at the top of the boys' food chain. And since

they were just shot down by Jun and Reina's group after inviting them to lunch mere moments ago, the timing for Kai couldn't have been worse.

*What's she inviting that creepy geek for?*

*Momoko's never even spoken to us!*

*Screw this loser!*

*He's dead meat!*

Or, so their glares at Kai communicated quite clearly. However, Kai pretended not to notice (out of fear for his life) and said to Momoko:

"Sorry, but uh, no."

"Huuuuh?"

Momoko didn't seem to expect that saying no was an option. Her suspiciously beady eyes widened in disbelief that he was turning down all *this*.

Or so it seemed, until her brow started to furrow in fury. Her desperate attempts to hold it back caused her face to twitch in an overall hilarious expression.

"P-Pardon? Ash, y-you do realize who you're saying no to, don't you?"

"Mihara, right?"

"You're saying no to *Momoko*! The cutest girl in school, Momoko! This is the kind of chance that a shut-in like you will never get again if you let it slip away!"

"I mean, I'm kinda fine with that..."

Kai didn't mince words. Momoko's eyes were bulging in shock, but he paid no mind.

Kai learned one thing from the deluge of insults Reina subjected him to the other day. Indeed, she was right about one thing: no matter what Momoko demands, just politely decline. If you can't do as the Romans do, then just stay home. That's a fine policy to follow.

...Anyway.

Kai didn't exactly get along well with Momoko, and he hadn't forgotten who was bashing him in that group chat, so he figured having lunch together would be pure torment. As such, he declined at the first opportunity. Politely.

"Die in a fire.☆" Out of rage, Momoko tried to kick Kai's shins in. Kai effortlessly dodged. "What're you dodging for?!"

"Why wouldn't I? I don't wanna get hurt."

"You're supposed to stand there and take it!"

"No way! This isn't a cartoon."

"Ash, you annoying dummy! I hate you!" After shouting the parting words of a third-rate childhood friend, Momoko stormed off in frustration and tears.

"I'm the annoying one?" Kai grumbled as he was left standing stock still.

Once the out-of-season Typhoon Momoko passed, Kai entered the hall. This time, he came across Nocchi, who was from an entirely different class. She was the ace spiker of Asagi High's women's volleyball team. When they stood together, Kai could really tell how tall and lean she was.

But just then, he got served something unexpected!

She asked if he was planning to eat at the cafeteria and invited him to eat with her. Unlike Momoko, Kai didn't sense any malice coming from her, a feeling that was by *no* means influenced by her cup size. But eating alone with her, without Jun, was a bit of a tall order. He felt intimidated.

"O-Oh, I couldn—"

"Great, glad that's settled! Let's go!"

Nocchi grabbed Kai's hand without hesitation and pulled him along with the force of an athlete.

*Wh-What happened to politely turning them down...?*

Ah, how difficult it is to resist being swept up in the pace of others. It's not a skill that can be mastered in a day. Kai had to chuckle at himself. And worry if he'd be able to carry a conversation between the two of them.

"Ash, you know a ton about manga, right?"

"M-Maybe. I know bits and pieces."

Nocchi brought up an unexpected topic, so Kai instantly put up his defenses. To be fair, he wasn't confident he could give an informed opinion on niche topics like the trend shifts in 2000s-era women's manga in 100 characters or less on the spot, so he decided to play it safe.

"You seen how sick *Hinomaru Sumo*'s been lately? Also, it's still kinda off the radar for everyone I know, but I've been super into *Jujutsu Kaisen*..."

*She's just asking about Shounen Jump?!*

Sure, it was the biggest name in manga, but Kai felt a little duped inside. And it was kinda late to tell her that everyone and their mothers were following *Jujutsu Kaisen*...

Oh well, Kai loved conversations like these either way.

"If you like *Hinomaru*, do you know that Jin'ou internet meme? The one where he's crying over Uruka from *We Never Learn*."

"The what now? Send me a link."

Nocchi showed off her extroverted essence by casually whipping out her smartphone and insisting that Kai add her as a friend.

Kai may have been swept up by her pace and her power, but their manga talk proved more exciting than he expected. It gave Kai a newfound respect for *Jump* as a universal language that everyone, young or old, boy or girl, normie or shut-in, could communicate with.

Which is why he didn't notice...

That from within the classroom, Matsuda's gang was glaring at him the whole time. Their hostile, malice-filled gazes didn't let him go.



The first class after lunch was PE. April was the month of physical evaluations, so they had to run laps the whole time. Even as a second year, the routine was the same. Kai was not quite athletically gifted. If he were to grade his abilities on a *very* generous curve, he'd put himself somewhere below average.

Also, he was slow.

As someone skilled at action games, he should've had good reflexes, but things didn't seem to work the way he intended when it came time to move his entire body.

"...Whoa. What if I'm, like, Kirito?"

He once suggested that to Jun in a melodramatic tone. But as someone who never read the source material for *Sword Art Online*, she just gave him a look of abject confusion. He supposed that anime-only fans wouldn't catch the nuance...

However, he was definitely feeling the results of his exercise. *Heh, I'm the man who threw ten thousand punches in a month in Fitness Boxing. I'm built different.* Kai mentally patted himself on the back. He figured he'd only get exasperated sighs if he boasted to anyone else, so he kept it to himself.

Once class was over, everyone dragged themselves back to the boys' locker room. The locker room was a small, standalone building off to the side of the gym. It was well-maintained, with the rows of lockers inside it sparkling clean, a far cry from the den of filth and musk that you'd expect. That just went to show that this private school took its athletics seriously.

"Spill the beans, Nakamura. You got five seconds to tell me when you got on Nocchi's good side. Capiche?"

"Hey now, Kishimoto. I don't think you need to talk like a bully to get answers..."

"Up yours, Satou! Dammit, Nakamura, what's a dork like you gettin' chicks for?!"

"I-It's not like that! I just see her every now and then since I know Jun."

"And I'm already jealous of that, ya dweebenheimer! Please, ya gotta introduce me sometime, I'm beggin' ya!"

"I'll say something to Jun next time I see her..." *One thing.*

"Nakamura... you're a god!"

Kai shared a pretty pointless conversation with Kishimoto and Satou as they got changed. That's why he was unaware of what was hurtling at him from behind.

An instant...

Yes, it happened in an instant. Kai took a blunt force to the back of the head. He lurched forward, and his forehead collided with the locker.

"Ow... ch..."

He swung around to assess his surroundings and pieced together that a basketball had been thrown at him.

"Sorry 'bout that, otacreep. My hand slipped."

It came from Matsuda, who was loitering with his crew around the window. His words were apologetic, but none of them tried to hide their snickering. It was just a cheap provocation, but Kishimoto and Satou were already shaking in their boots. Students these days go their whole lives without ever being in a real fight. And Kai was no exception.

*You wanna go, Matsuda? Against the ten-thousand-punch legend himself?* He could pump himself up all he wanted, but his knees were rattling. And Matsuda's gang? Beating the crap out of weaklings was their specialty.

"Rest of you can scram," said one of Matsuda's cronies.

"We only got business with these here geeks," said another.

Matsuda's cronies, Takeda and Umeda, had sinister sneers on their faces as they feigned niceness to the rest of the boys. As usual, they yammered like idiots who probably couldn't even tie their own shoes (in Kai's biased opinion).

But that's all he needed to make them finish changing and leave all the quicker. They didn't want to get wrapped up in this. And they certainly didn't want to earn the ire of the group at the top of the class food chain, so they left Kai's group behind and ran for their lives. None of them thought they were being cold.

Soon, only Kai, Kishimoto, and Satou were left. It was like they were staring down a pack of hungry wolves, and their appetite for blood was palpable.

"Nakamura. You. Me. After school." Matsuda left no room for questioning in his demand.

"You know what'll happen if you don't show, right?"

"You're all goin' through hell 'til the day you drop out."

"You wouldn't do that to yer friends, wouldja, Nakamura?"

The three cronies all cackled like hyenas. Kai couldn't so much as breathe in the face of such brazen cruelty. The cold sweat dripping from his forehead wouldn't stop.

How did he get himself into this mess? Kai knew only one thing. It was that escape was not an option. He couldn't risk taking Kishimoto or Satou down with him. And that was that.



## Episode 006: When Schoolyard Battles Become Commonplace

The rear of Asagi High School's gym was, before anything else, desolate. You could get a little rough without anyone, even a teacher, ever noticing. It was to the point where nobody would hear you scream.

Even though it was spring, the wind carried a chill, making it that much harder to ignore the stillness hanging in the air.

*Really, even I wouldn't come around here if I didn't have a reason.*

Reina stared down coldly from a window on the gym's indoor balcony.

The object of her gaze was Matsuda. He stood boldly by the foot of the staircase that led to the balcony where Reina was lying low. His hands were crammed in his pockets and a slight sneer was plastered on his face as he awaited his guest.

Of course, that guest was none other than Kai. Her best friend's lover, as much as she refused to accept him. He couldn't hide his nerves—he showed up behind the gym with the gait of a terrified rodent.

"Well if it ain't Mr. Otacreeper. I'm impressed you came alone instead of runnin' for mama."

Matsuda scoffed at him as a greeting. Reina had to agree on that point. She felt Kai was finally showing some guts.

Matsuda's sneer continued to contort into something far more sinister. "That's the only compliment you'll get from me. Here, we gotcha a *present*."

For a moment, Kai looked like he didn't understand what Matsuda meant. Unfortunately, he figured out soon enough.

The "present" was a deluge of water being dumped on his head.

Now that he was soaked head to toe, Kai's expression was the dictionary definition of dumbstruck. But it didn't stop there...

"Gaaaaaaaahahahaha!"

"Bro, look at that face!"

"Yo, nerd boy, I think you gotta wait a few weeks before the pools open up!"

"What a loser! Loooooooooser!" They made sure to drench him in ridicule, too.

Matsuda didn't come alone. Takeda, Umeda, and Fukuda popped out from the staircase leading to the balcony. The three peered over from the landing on the half-turn flight of stairs, making them just below where Reina stood. They had filled a bucket up with water and lay in wait until Kai was right under them. It was a truly crass, childish prank.

"Whatcha think of our welcome package, otacreeper?"

"We know ya love it!"

"C'mon buddy, we're classmates, ain't we?"

"Yeah, and hey, we're otacreeps, too! We're all about that loli, rape, 'n eroge shit... NOT! Gahahahaha!"

Their malicious taunting revealed how uncultured they really were, filling Reina with violent disgust. But she held no illusions about their nature, so she just had to see this through.

"Aight, Nakamura... for an otacreep, you haven't been stayin' in your lane lately, y'know?" Matsuda spoke as though Kai had this coming.

"... Okay, I've heard enough of that word, you need to be more specific. Are you saying *I'm* creepy? Or are you saying otaku as a whole are creepy? If you're badmouthing otaku, then you ought to correct yourself." Kai might have been soaked, but he argued back in a hushed voice. Surprisingly, he hadn't broken yet.

"See, this is what I mean by not stayin' in your lane! It's frickin' creepy!"

"...So, you meant *I'm* creepy because I don't stay in my lane. And that bothers you?"

"Sure does. Like, you're an otacreep goin' out with Jun? And what was up with today? You had to go flirtin' with Momoko and Mizuno too, just to show off?!"

"Mizuno" was Nocchi's real name.

"Somethin' ain't right here! What's a shut-in like you gettin' talked up for when they won't even give us the time of day? Are you blackmailing 'em like it's one of your porn games? Huh?!"

*Ridiculous. How stupid are these people?*

"...How stupid are you people?"

Reina was irritated that she had to share a thought with Kai. She furiously attributed this irritation to just how sickening Matsuda's behavior was.

Matsuda, however, was far more irritated than her. He let it show as he bellowed, "You're an eyesore, ya otacreep!"

"...So, what do you want me to do? You don't expect me to drop out, do you?"

"I mean, hey, I won't stop you." People with poor imagination and planning skills have the ability to casually say the cruelest things. Matsuda proved this with the ultimatum he gave Kai:

"But you know what I want. Break up with Jun."

He gave his order with a fearsome, wide-eyed glare. Reina didn't know who died and made him king, but his tone almost implied that this was his way of showing mercy. To Kai, this was likely something he couldn't bear to hear. But to Reina? This was what she was *waiting* to hear.

"Jun and I aren't even dating!"

So, Kai's choice was to bark back.

"I don't care. I'm tellin' you to keep your distance from now on. From Jun, from *everyone* in Reina's group. Be a good little otacreep and stay in your lane!"

"I refuse!"

Kai firmly rejected him. You could say he even showed some backbone. Unfortunately, Matsuda took that moment to plant his fist deep into Kai's gut.

"Guh... Haiiee..."

The contents of Kai's lungs were wrung out in the form of a pathetic whelp. Matsuda was a pro at punching people. Kai probably tried to dodge and failed. His body keeled over at a rather amusing angle. He fell to the ground on all fours and squirmed, as though the impact left him unable to stand or even control his body. He seemed to have trouble breathing, too. He was even wheezing in pain.

"Startin' to figure out where your lane is?" Matsuda scoffed at him from above.

"Whooooo, that looked like it huuuuurt!"

"Yo, Matsuda, think you could take down an elephant with that punch?"

"Hey, otacreep, you good? Still kickin'? Just kiddin'. We'll see ya at the funeral!" Matsuda's cronies cackled and jeered from the staircase. Even against this hail of heckling, Reina watched as Kai could do nothing but writhe in pain.

*What a pathetic man.* Reina mentally kicked him while he was down. Still, she had to admit it was typical. Brute force is hard to oppose.

If Kai weren't going out with her best friend, Reina wouldn't bother begrudging him so directly. In fact, she'd never notice him to begin with. *But a man needs to be more than typical to be worthy of Jun.* Reina stared at Kai coldly, callously, and cruelly.

Reina found out that Kai had been called out behind the gym after school let out. She figured that Matsuda's gang threatened him not to tell a soul, but Kishimoto and Satou worked up the courage to come to her for advice.

"Well, I think you're right to ask me instead of a teacher."

Reina wholeheartedly commended them for making the right choice. When you want an actual solution to problems of bullying, threatening, and violence, teachers rarely provide one. They force students to go through with their nonsensical resolutions if they don't look the other way to begin with. Nothing is solved, the perpetrators get angrier, they take it out on the victims even more, etc., etc. You didn't need to watch the nightly news to get the idea. Any student knows in their bones that teachers just want to cover their own asses.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Problems between students require solutions between students. And these boys' assumption that the queen of the school's food chain would be their best bet was absolutely correct.

*But apologies in advance... I happen to have a personal grudge against Nakamura.* Were it anyone else, Reina could have intervened and put a stop to Matsuda's violence easily. But instead, she observed.

"I'll take care of this," she lied to Kai's friends. She put them at ease so she could watch Kai suffer. She had plans to go shopping with the rest of the girls, but she told them that something urgent came up and canceled. After watching them leave for town, Reina quietly holed up in this spot where nothing would be hidden from her view.

It couldn't be going any better. Reina hoped she could tell Kai to never show his face around Jun with Matsuda's beating fresh in his mind. That should drive enough fear into Kai that he'd cut Jun off all on his own. So far, this was perfect.

"Poor Nakamura. You don't want him getting any *rougher* now, do you?" Reina monologued to herself like a coldhearted queen.

*Come, submit to Matsuda. Say you'll break up with her. If so, I'll grant you mercy and call for help.*

*And then, eventually...*

Kai put force into the limbs he supported himself with. He rose with a rattled body but a resolute heart. And he glared at Matsuda right in the eyes. His gaze may have been stained with tears, but it was fierce!

"I think you get the point now," sneered Matsuda. "Don't come near Jun again, got it?"

To that, Kai had one response. "I refuse!!" he shouted firmly.

Reina, the coldhearted queen, could only stare at Kai in wonder.

She could have sworn that this pathetic cur wasn't getting up again. She could have sworn he'd submit to force and suck up to Matsuda as much as he could. This was entirely unexpected.

"Quit actin' tough, otacreep!"

Matsuda gave Kai another blow and dropped him to the ground again.

"I refuse!" But Kai stood up one more time. And this time, he glared at point blank range.

"You don't get a choice, nerd!"

"I refuse!"

Kai got punched. He fell. But he stood back up. And he glared.

"If you got a death wish, then be my frickin' guest!"

"I refush!"

Kai got punched. He fell. But he stood back up. And he glared.

"Nobodies like you got no right to breathe the same air as Jun!"

"I refyuje..."

Kai got punched. He fell. But he stood back up. And he glared.

"Q-Quit it already! You're givin' me the creeps!"

"I... re... fyuge..."

Kai got punched. He fell. But he stood back up. And he glared.

Kai kept standing back up. Reina couldn't imagine why he'd go so far, or how he *could* go so far. And even though he clearly had the guts to return those blows, he never did.

*Why?* Reina stood by the balcony window with her eyes transfixed on Kai.

"The hell's your deal?" said Matsuda.

Her incredulity seemed to be shared by Matsuda. But this time, she didn't find that sickening. Reina couldn't take her eyes off Kai. Her normally cold hands were breaking out in sweat.

"We otaku are pacifists! We don't have one-track minds like you trash! We know what happens when you hit people, so we don't do it!" Kai bellowed at the top of his lungs. The force was enough to make Matsuda flinch.

"I'm the one with Jun!" he continued. "And I wanna stay there! That's not *your* choice to make; it's *mine*!" Kai screamed as loud as his voice would allow. Reina stumbled as though those words hit her directly.

Kai said nothing more. He just kept glaring at Matsuda with animosity in his eyes. Matsuda could say nothing more. He just trembled with his fist raised in the air. Before Kai's sheer vehemence, he was completely overwhelmed.

And there they were. Matsuda was secretly feared by just about every boy in class. Yet his opponent, Kai, was the most unassuming wallflower of them all. With the fight now in such a stalemate, one could call Kai the victor. And he relied not on the strength of his fists, but the strength of his heart. Or, at least, the part of his heart that held his feelings for Jun.

Up behind the window on the balcony, Reina found herself sighing. "I never expected it'd turn out this way..."

Her hopes had been completely dashed. And yet, she felt something burning in her heart. Her body quivered silently in excitement.

She kept staring long and hard at Kai's distant countenance. His face had become hideously warped from the bruising it had taken. His mouth was drenched red from a bloody nose. And yet... to Reina's eyes, he seemed so gallant, so bold!

"C'mon Matsuda, what're ya waitin' for?"

The prodding from Takeda brought Reina back to her senses.

"Let's body this sucker!"

"Aw, he's dead! RIP in peace, otacreep!"

Matsuda's cronies hurried down the stairs to back their boss up. With that, Matsuda was heartened enough to move again.

The fight was now a sadistic four on one. They surrounded Kai and used him as a punching bag. He still tried to stand up, but that wasn't physically

possible anymore. His opponents realized it was much faster to just keep beating him down instead of letting him get up each time. All he had left was his glare.

"...Wait right there. Hold on for just a bit longer." Spurred into action, Reina left her window and ran off in search of help. "Oh, how I detest running!"

As someone who prided herself on her refined demeanor, she couldn't remember the last time she ran for someone else. She resisted the urge to click her tongue and sprinted with all her might.

Kai found himself in a tornado of torment.

"Say you'll break up with Jun, dammit!"

"Swear you'll never go near Reina's group again!"

"And let's hear ya say it on video!"

"Better hurry if ya wanna live! 'Cuz you're, like, actually *not* gonna live!"

Every punch and every kick was followed by a threat. Kai had to chuckle to himself as he was tossed about by the waves of brutality.

*How about you quit talking tough and put your money where your mouth is? Go ahead, kill me... if you've got the guts.*

The edges of his blood-drenched lips curled upward, giving his cheeks a cynical curve.

"I refuse!" Kai shouted. He was met with another beating as he writhed on the ground. No matter how pitiful or weak he seemed, he would yield to neither their thrashes nor their taunts.

"I refuse!!" Kai shouted. But this time... it was almost as though someone heard him...

"You there, second-years! What's the meaning of this?!"

Help had arrived. Kai heard the sound of footsteps rushing toward him. He managed to tilt his head in their direction and get a peek between the lumps obscuring his vision.

It was a teacher. A teacher with a face fit for a shoujo manga and a reputation fit for royalty.

Mr. Prince had come for him.

And behind him was Reina. In a rare display of raw emotion, she was struggling to hold back her tears.

"Oh shit, Matsuda!"

"Let's scram!"

"Shit, it's Reina? *She* ratted us out?"

Matsuda's cronies were clearly flustered that a teacher had caught them red-handed.

"Cram it! You think we're turning back *now*?!"

Matsuda didn't share their sentiment. His eyes were bloodshot, and his sense of reason was overpowered by the rush of adrenaline. He aimed his fists at the teacher.

But they didn't hit their mark.

"Hasn't anyone ever taught you not to bite off more than you can chew?"

Royalteach effortlessly caught Matsuda's fist with his right palm. His movements were far more forceful than you'd expect from someone so handsome. He must've had many more fights under his belt than a punk like Matsuda.

"Geh..."

Matsuda cooled right off as Royalteach flashed an indomitable grin.

"But if you insist, I'll take you up on your offer, be it one-on-one or four-on-one. Don't worry. I'm not so cowardly as to take a fight between men to court, so feel free to come at me."

"U-Uh, on second thought..." Matsuda stumbled over his words, clearly not expecting a mere teacher to intimidate him. That cocksure attitude he had when beating Kai to a pulp seemed to have shriveled up.

"If you don't want to fight me, then this is simply an act of violence, and I won't hesitate to report it to the school as such. Understand?"

"Oh. Wait, I mean—"

"Do. You. Understand?!"

Royalteach shouted him down in a booming voice. Matsuda's gang immediately backed down and fell to their knees. Their shoulders drooped as a sign of complete resignation.

*He sure knows how to teach people a lesson...*

As he watched Royalteach sternly stare down Matsuda's gang, Kai marveled at how much further that went than just this teacher's job title.

Shortly afterward, Royalteach was kind enough to bring Kai to a hospital.

"I'll tell your teacher about what happened later. Hop in—don't be shy."

And with that, he offered Kai the passenger seat of the Suzuki Swift Sport he had in the school parking lot. Kai's uniform still hadn't dried from the water those goons dumped on him earlier, but Royalteach didn't mind if the seat got wet. The rumors of his reliability were true after all.

While they were on the road, Kai checked his face over and over in the rear-view mirror and felt like laughing each time. His eyelids were so swollen that they almost made him look like a ghost. His cheeks were as puffed up as a blowfish. His mouth was caked in dried blood from his nose. Even though he knew it was his own face—or perhaps because of that—he found the ugliness so bizarre that a chuckle almost rose out. Too bad he didn't have the energy to laugh.

"I'm impressed you held out for so long," Royalteach told him as he kept his eyes on the road and his hands at ten and two. "And that you never punched back."

“...Well, yeah, I’m a coward.”

“A coward would cry and beg for mercy. They wouldn’t dare talk back.”

“...Well, yeah, I threw ten thousand punches in *Fitness Boxing*. My fists are lethal weapons.”

“Hahaha!”

Royalteach gave a hearty laugh. Kai was glad he liked the joke.

“Well,” the teacher continued, “fighting back definitely isn’t the only way for a man to defend his pride. You didn’t want to stoop to the level of idiots like them. I understand.”

His lines were cheesy, but his voice was as serious as could be.

*...I can see why the boys warm up to this guy.*

Kai was grateful for the cheesy commendation. He was grateful that Mr. Prince understood him without needing a word of explanation. He was grateful that he never stopped looking forward. It meant that Kai would be spared any embarrassment if he suddenly broke out into tears.

After getting some light treatment at the hospital, Kai had an examination to make sure there was no permanent damage. His results:

“Go home and rest until tomorrow just to be safe. You should be fine, but come back immediately if you experience any headaches or nausea. Call an ambulance if you have to.”

A doctor gave him a short diagnosis and let him go. Basically, he was to watch his symptoms at home. Kai was certain he’d need to be hospitalized, so he found it kind of deflating.

Manga and the like had taught Kai that bleeding from the head (particularly the forehead) was a sign of intensity, that faces can swell quickly into painful contortions, but that sometimes the heaviest damage is skin deep. Kai finally had the opportunity to have the truth of those lessons literally beaten into him.

And yet, after such a harrowing, painful experience... a doctor took an objective look at him and said he wasn’t banged up too bad.

“Uh, sure...”

It didn’t quite feel right, but Kai got in the passenger seat of the Swift Sport regardless. Was this the placebo effect? Knowing he’d be fine made him notice the pain all around his body less and less.

“It might sound weird for me to say, but I guess you’re a bit let down?”

Royalteach had a chuckle from the driver’s seat. After staying with Kai throughout the entire treatment and examination, he was now driving him home.

“Well, that’s the most that tough-talking punks these days can do. They’re all scared to fight alone, so they usually just gather their buddies to make sure whichever weakling they pick out can’t defend themselves. They’ve never been in a real fight. They know a bit about how to hurt, but that ain’t the same.”

“...Were you a little rough as a student, Mr. Prince?”



"Well, certainly more than I am now. But that's something I heard from a teacher back when *I* was a punk. 'Tough-talkin' punks these days ain't much,' he told me."

"Did your teacher go to school in ancient Sparta?"

Kai wasn't sure if he was supposed to take this as a joke. Doing the math, that teacher must have been a student twenty or thirty years ago? Maybe even forty? This was obviously before Kai was born, so he had trouble imagining it.

"There used to be a manga called *Be-Bop High School*. It was just about a bunch of delinquents beating each other up, but until *Attack on Titan* came around, it held the record for the largest single-volume first print run in Kodansha series history. In an age when manga wasn't the pop culture force it is now, that was considered selling like hotcakes."

"Wow!"

"And *Rokudenashi Blues* in *Jump* was crazy, too. See, every school in the country had its share of hotheaded delinquents. They'd squabble over who was strong, beat the crap out of each other, and the last one standing was the coolest. People idolized that life. That's why they wrote manga about that stuff, and it flew off the shelves. It was a different time; to millennials like us, it probably seems like Sparta."

"Uh, haha..."

Kai gave an awkward chuckle and thanked his lucky stars that he wasn't born a boomer. But what was Royalteach trying to get at? Kai found his examples interesting, so he listened intently, but he didn't quite get the point or meaning behind it all. He was mentally tilting his head.

"So, what I'm trying to say," Royalteach continued. While keeping his eyes on the road, like any good driver.





He kept his right hand on the wheel, but lifted his left from the gear stick to extend it toward Kai's head. He placed it on top and ruffled his hair a bit.

"If something like today every happens again, come straight to me. I'm more helpful than trying to solve everything between students. Well, I try to be, anyway."

The hand that trembled with each of Royalteach's hearty laughs was bigger than Kai expected. And his arms were buff. He might have looked like a heartthrob, but he was a grown man.

With that, Kai understood what Royalteach was getting at.

*I'm not scared of today's punks like Matsuda and his cronies. If they start something, I'll stop it. Physically. I won't look the other way.*

That was the promise he was making with Kai.

*If this guy wrote a Japanese test, I bet every question would be a troll.*

Kai forgot the pain in his stomach for a bit as he smiled and thanked goodness that Royalteach taught social studies.

"Thanks a ton, I'll call you when the time comes."

"Sure."

Royalteach retracted his hand. And for the short time until they reached Kai's home, the two got excited talking about the modern big three of shounen manga together. It was then that Kai remembered that he had always wanted to have a manga chat with this teacher.



Once he got home, Kai shut himself inside his room, changed into his sleepwear, and curled up into bed.

Royalteach explained the situation to his parents over the phone, so Kai's mom elected not to ask her son about it. What was done was done, and she didn't want to make him admit that he took such a one-sided beating. She understood that being a worrywart right now would only do more harm to Kai than good. He'd be better off if he were left alone for a bit.

"I know I'm supposed to rest... but man, I'm bored."

Kai checked the clock, and it hadn't even hit 7 p.m. Too early to expect drowsiness to set in any time soon.

Reading a manga or light novel counted as rest, right? What about watching anime? Could he handle a video game?

Quite some time passed as his mind focused on such trifling thoughts. But soon, he heard the thundering footsteps of someone dashing up the stairs. And shortly after, his bedroom door swung open.

"Kai!"

It was Jun, gasping for breath.

"You went to the hospital? What did the doctors say?!"

She kneeled by the side of the bed with a look so strained that you'd be forgiven for thinking *she* was the one who'd been sent to the ER.

"...Oh, they said it's nothing serious. I... can be back in school tomorrow."

Jun had closed their distance so aggressively that Kai found himself shrinking back.

"For real?!"

"C-Come on, would I lie to you?"

"Pheeeew, thank gooooodness..."

Jun looked as though the weight of the world was lifted off her shoulders as she relaxed her body and slumped over the bed.

"...Weren't you out shopping with friends?"

"I was. But I got a call from Reina, so I came running."

Jun answered with a muffled voice, as her face was still buried in the bedsheets.

"Come to think of it, she's the one who got me out of that situation... I gotta thank her tomorrow."

"Yeah, I thanked her a ton over the phone."

"Ah, right. That's a better idea. Fujisawa would probably rather hear that from you than me."

Kai joked that she wasn't exactly his number one fan. He was waiting for Jun to joke along, but she didn't respond. She just kept her face planted on the bed with no indication that she'd raise it, so Kai couldn't tell what expression she was making.

But... he did hear a snuffle. Kai had to chuckle at that.

"C'mon, Jun, don't cry."

"...I'm not crying."

"I'm the one who's in enough pain that I could cry, right?"

"...I said I'm not crying."

Jun continued to play it cool with her face held firmly down. But despite her best efforts, her sniffles only grew louder until a few of them turned into sobs.

Kai could only chuckle again. In an imitation of Royalteach, he reached his right arm over and gently placed his hand on the back of her head. While he savored the smoothness of her hair, he gently caressed her head to calm her nerves and soothe her heart.

Once he did, the levee finally broke. Jun wailed and started bawling, making an increasingly visible puddle on Kai's comforter.

"See? You *are* crying."

"But I was so worried... Just because you weren't hospitalized doesn't mean I'd stop worrying. And I just couldn't relax until I saw your face..."

"Can you relax now?"

"Yeah, I'm sooo relaxed... but still a little worried..."

"Well, stick around until that's all gone."

"Yeah... I will..."

Jun dragged her face up and down against the covers in agreement.

Kai chuckled yet again. He had to wonder who was visiting who here. *Well, I'm definitely glad to have someone to talk to.* Times like these made him so grateful to have such a friend.

...However. Kai noticed a peculiar tingling in his nose as Jun was discharging the contents of hers. And before long, he was sneezing in succession.

*Uh-oh, that's not good,* Kai realized as he sniffled deeply.

"...Sorry, Jun. The injuries might not have been major, but I think I caught a cold..."

It was probably due to the bucket of water Matsuda's cronies doused him with before they beat his ass. It was pretty chilly out today, and he was stuck in those wet clothes for a while. Maybe the fact that they had dried by the time he got home made him careless. Maybe he should've taken a long, hot bath to warm his bones the second he got in the door...

In fact, he was feeling chillier by the second. Kai knew his body well; when he got fevers, he'd start getting a chill. This was definitely a cold.

"So uh, you oughta go for the day. Please? I don't want you catching it."

"Fine, I'll catch it."

"Don't be silly..."

Kai tried to reason with Jun. But before he could go any further, her face shot up, and his gaze was captured by the expression she finally revealed.

Her tear-stained eyes left an impression. To someone like Jun who always minded her appearance, it must have been a humiliating state to be in. But those tears came from her concern for Kai and were shed for his sake. How could he see her as anything less than beautiful?

Jun argued back with that teary face and runny nose.

"It's my fault Matsuda beat you up, isn't it?!"

Kai gulped before looking back sternly. "No. That's absolutely not why." It was Matsuda's fault. It was that coward's and nobody else's.

"I knew it! Besides... if I were in your shoes and someone told me to stop being friends with you, I'd never do it no matter how hard they punched or kicked! I wouldn't accept it! I'd say no to my last breath!"

"Jun..."

That tugged on his heartstrings. Kai was about to cry over her crying. That's how happy he was to hear Jun say that.

"So let me catch it. We'll have a cold together."

"Haha... I dunno what to do with you..."

Kai had no clue what was running through Jun's head. He couldn't tell if there was any logic in there at all. And yet, he found her argument strangely convincing.

"I got it. Just stay by my side for a bit."

"Sure!"

Jun eagerly responded and hopped onto the bed. To Kai's surprise, she pulled up the sheets and wrapped them around the two of them. To Kai's further surprise, she clutched his side as he lay on his back.

"Wait, what?"

"You always say you're chilly when you catch a cold, right? So I'm warming you up." Jun may have been the one to say it, but she was already beet red.

"You don't have to if it's gonna make you blush..."

"I'm not. That's the cold."

"Haha. Sure, you caught that quick."

Kai joked about it, but he figured his face was probably no less flushed. Maybe it was because they were both under the sheets, but Jun's lovely scent was stronger than usual. And her warmth traveled further than he expected... as though he could feel the beats of her racing heart through her skin.

"...Hey..."

"...What's up?"

"...Can I come closer?"

"...Sure. We're friends, after all."

Jun whispered into Kai's ear close enough to tickle it.

"...Well, since we're friends..."

"...Yeah. C'mere."

With Jun's permission granted, Kai changed his position. He turned from lying on his back to lying on his side with the both of them in each other's arms. The face of the cutest girl in his world, the one who was everything he was looking for, was so close that she took his breath away.

"...Like it?"

"...I do."

The body Kai held close was so soft, and oh-so warm. The chill before the cold was the furthest thing from his mind.

The next day, Kai and Jun were gleefully absent from school. The two of them had gleefully caught colds.



After sleeping for a whole day, Kai was back to full health. Maybe he got off with a light cold because Jun shouldered half the burden. After a quick message on LINE, he found that she was planning to be back at school today, Wednesday. With their agreement to meet in the classroom made, Kai left for school after his one-day gap.

*I need to get someone to show me their notes from yesterday. Kishimoto probably didn't take any worth reading, so maybe I should ask for Satou's...*

He thought long and hard about such classroom concerns as he arrived at school without incident. Once he made it to the shoe lockers, he found Reina, who appeared to be waiting for someone...

*Erk.*

Kai's awareness of her loathing made him recoil by reflex, but he quickly gave it a second thought. She seemed to be the one who saved him by calling for Royalteach, so he had to give his thanks.

"G-Good morning, Fujisawa!"

Kai timidly approached her as he performed the requisite mental gymnastics to assure himself it wasn't "unnecessary contact" or that she wouldn't get mad at him.

"Good morning. I've been waiting!"

Reina greeted him with a radiant and flawlessly faked smile.

*Wh-Wh-Wh-What's gotten into her?!*

He was startled but too afraid to pry, so he opted to get his business over with first. As they walked side by side toward their classroom, he cut to the chase.

"You were the one who called for Royalteach when Matsuda's gang was beating me up, right? Thanks for that."

"Oh, you needn't thank me. It was Kishimoto and Satou who summoned their courage to tell me that you were called out behind the gym."

"Ah, I see. Guess there's a lot of people I gotta thank."

Kai may have sounded bashful, but his expression was beaming. He had just learned that there were a bunch of people on his side. What could have made him happier?

The queen also filled him in on what had happened while he was out.

"Matsuda's gang was suspended for two weeks and received a yellow card on top of it. They were told in no uncertain terms that any further acts of violence would result in immediate expulsion."

"...Isn't that kinda harsh?"

"Perhaps. If you had a one-track mind like those trash, you'd be serving a share of their sentence." Even Reina was impressed that Kai didn't throw any punches back.

"On the flip side, that means I gotta see their faces again in just two weeks. Not lookin' forward to that..."

Kai made another sheepish complaint as he hid his reddened cheeks. But now that he'd spoken it out loud, he realized it could actually be a serious problem. Those guys weren't the type to learn their lessons, so they'd come back to make his life miserable. Or worse—come out for revenge. They didn't want to get expelled either, so they'd probably shift to shadier methods of torment, methods that wouldn't leave much evidence. In that case, there might be a limit to how much even Royalteach could help... Just the thought made Kai anxious.

"You'll be fine." Reina paid no mind to Kai's fears as she made her casual statement. "Don't worry, Matsuda's gang is going to do a lot of thinking about what they did. They won't bother you again."

"Uhhhhh, really?" Kai found this hard to believe. He'd never seen delinquents like them turn over a new leaf.

"Rest assured, I'll *make* them think."



“Um?”

“Oh, don’t mind me, just talking to myself.”

Reina shot Kai another radiant, flawlessly faked smile. Kai decided not to press for details out of fear for his life, instead choosing to return to the main topic at hand.

“Anyway, Fujisawa, I’d like to thank you.”

“As I told you, you needn’t thank me.”

“Hm?”

Kai felt a bit suspicious of how guarded Reina was despite maintaining her precisely pretty smile. But Reina readily admitted the truth.

“Does it not strike you as odd? I knew from the beginning that you were called out. And yet, they still beat you down. Your help didn’t arrive in time.”

“...Is it that strange?”

“I was watching them beat you to a pulp from the beginning.”

“Geh!” Kai’s face contorted after hearing a confession that he could have gone his whole life without knowing. “...Why?”

“I thought you had it coming. Besides, I wanted you to break up with Jun, too.”

*Okay, yeah, this girl is terrifying.* The shiver that was sent down Kai’s spine reminded him full well. “...But wait a second. That still doesn’t add up.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Then what was the point of calling Royalteach? You could’ve just waited for me to beg Matsuda for mercy.”

“Indeed, that was the original plan...” Reina suddenly halted in her tracks. She turned to face Kai, who had also paused. “But you said that you’d never break up with Jun no matter what they put you through. It made me think better of you. So, I changed my mind and decided to help. Nothing more.”

Curiously enough, they found themselves in the same hallway where Reina told Kai she had overestimated him one week ago. This was right where she told him that he wasn’t a suitable man, and that she wouldn’t accept their relationship, among plenty of other things.

And in that exact same place...

“So, would you consider becoming friends with me?” Reina asked with a radiant smile. One that was harder to discern if it was faked or honest.

“Are... you... serious?” Kai was incredulous that she’d ask after all this time, but the queen was still undaunted.

“Why not? The friend of my friend is my friend, are they not?”

“You’re not wrong... I think?”

And that was the moment that Kai could call one more girl his friend.

"Now, let us be off... *Ash*." Reina invited Kai to the classroom. He looked none too pleased, but followed regardless.

"I told you, it's Nakamura!"

"Is it? Come now, we're friends. You can call me Reina, and that's a *privilege*."

"At least call me Kai! Jun does too!"

"Then let me call you Ash. Changing one's nickname is an important technique for emphasizing one's character, according to Jun."

"Do you even know what that means?"

Shortly afterward, Jun's face lit up, and the entire class's eyes went wide at the sight of those two joking as they entered the classroom.



But there are some corners of the world that are better off unexplored. And for Kai, this was absolutely one of them.

Matsuda's bellows echoed throughout the karaoke room.

"Shit, I can't get a holda Chiaki!"

"Every one of 'em is leavin' us on read!"

"They're actin' like it'd kill 'em to hang with us!"

"And they were beggin' to come along last time we asked!"

The boys were serving their suspension. They were supposed to be spending this time confined at home and studying on their own, but following such tedious rules had never been their style. Today, Wednesday, marked their second straight gathering in the two days following the incident, but they couldn't lift their spirits from the gloom of a suspension with a sausage party. They needed chicks.

So here they were, calling every girl they knew. And every single one was giving them the cold shoulder. It was enough to drive them nuts. They didn't need to shoot for someone high class like Reina; any random uggo or slut would do. But even after lowering their standards *that* far, they still weren't getting so much as a bite.

"Screw this bitch!"

"Who does she think she is?!"

With their shouts shifting to insults, the boys started taking out their frustrations on the walls.

Why were they suddenly getting the silent treatment? They had a clue. The first person they messaged over LINE was the biggest slut they knew, Suama Sakakibara from Class 3. Her reaction told them everything.

"Like, aren't you suspended?"

"Losers LMAO"

With that, she stopped even reading their texts.

And Matsuda was sure she wasn't alone; he bet everyone in school was gossiping about them! His gang was the butt of their jokes! How could he show his face at school again once their suspension ended?

"It's all 'cause of that otacreeper..."

Matsuda hit the wall with malice. The people from the next room over hit back, yelling at him to shut up. Matsuda's gang wasn't going to take that lying down.

"You wanna go?!"

"We ain't in a good mood over here!"

"Try us, punk! You're dead meat!"

"You don't wanna see how tough Matsuda is!"

The boys all kicked the walls and made threats. It was nothing more than a temper tantrum. But the next room went quiet, probably because that put them in their place.

"Shouldn't be talkin' shit if you're just gonna wuss out!" Matsuda gave the wall another knock or two to calm himself down. "Yeah, that's right. This is who we are. Nobody messes with us." A sinister grin rose on Matsuda's face as he finally had a good idea. "When we get back to school, that otacreeper's getting *slaughtered*."

"Yeah!" the others responded in unison.

"We gotta make an example outta him to show what happens when you stand up to *us*."

"Good idea!"

"Dude, let's do it!"

The cronies were gleefully on board. If they tortured Kai for everyone to see, then all those shit-talkers would know exactly how scary Matsuda was. 'Cause when it rains, it... something. Whatever it was that came up on that quiz. They would earn back their respect and set their place on the food chain in stone.

"So, what're we gonna do to that otacreeper?"

"I don't wanna get expelled, so it's gotta be somethin' more fun than a beating."

"How 'bout we take Kishimoto or whoever hostage and make him streak butt-naked around the school?"

"Ooh, I like it! But first, we gotta make sure Jun gets an eyeful of her boyfriend's microdick!"

"Gahah, that's evil, dude! Bet that creep'll get a boner over it, too."

"I know, like a total sicko!"

"Yeah, otaku are always into some messed-up shit, hahah!"

Matsuda's gang had a lot of fun coming up with ways to ruin Kai's life, each more cruel than the last. They noted their ideas down on their smartphones and committed to take action.

At that moment, they heard a knock at the door.

The boys looked at each other. Nobody had ordered any drinks, so there shouldn't have been any staff coming by. They thought it was strange, but the door burst open before they had the chance to respond. Someone entered the room... and it was none other than Reina.

"Yooooo!" all the boys said together.

After getting ignored by every girl they asked, even the ones who used to squeal with joy as they tagged along, the only one who showed up was the most untouchable beauty in school. Talk about snatching victory from... somewhere. That one was also on the quiz.

"Reina, babe, perfect timing! Have a seat!"

"Whatcha wanna sing? I'll put it in!"

"Or, hey, wanna hear Matsuda sing Kanjani?"

"Order whatever. It's our treat!"

Matsuda's gang immediately changed their tune to welcome Reina. Unfortunately, their music would stop soon enough. Because someone *else* followed her inside.

"Geh... erm..."

Every single one of the boys gasped. Their eyes widened in disbelief at what they were being faced with.

The figure of the man who followed Reina in was just *that* imposing. His height was so far beyond the average Japanese guy's that he had to duck when entering the doorway. His body was so buff that he looked like he was in a suit of armor. His age was maybe in the late 20s? He had the threatening countenance of a bloodthirsty beast who'd been dressed up and sent on the town. And he was wearing the kind of suit no man walking the straight and narrow would be caught dead in; it had the color and flash of a peacock, but its lapel was unusually wide. In other words, a mafia-style suit.

*W-Were the rumors of Reina dating someone in the yakuza true?!*

Matsuda gulped loudly. He wanted to run. Immediately. At least, if that were still an option here. Sadly, the entrance was fully blocked by the big guy before them.

"These the punks who beat up Jun's boyfriend?"

A glance from him was all it took to make Matsuda shiver. And a gaze from him, projecting far more presence than a high schooler ever could, was enough to freeze Matsuda in place.

"Yes, it's them. If that weren't enough, they're imbeciles who could never dream of learning from their mistakes."

Reina's scorn taught Matsuda a valuable lesson: the human voice was capable of sounding far more cold-blooded than he ever thought possible.

"Hasn't your teacher ever taught you not to bite off more than you can chew?" The massive mystery man before them sounded none too pleased.

"W-Wait, please! I mean, I beg of you!"

"Yeah, we'd never pick a fight with someone as terrify—I mean, as *terrific* as you!"

"You must have the wrong people!"

Matsuda's gang hurriedly shook their hands and heads in an attempt to earn some pity as they desperately argued their innocence. Unfortunately...

"You really are a bunch of fools," said Reina as she made it clear that she had no mercy to spare for them. "You still don't get it? To harm my own flesh and blood is to sign your own death warrant."

"F-Flesh and blood? Who?!"

"I got no clue who you're talkin' about!"

"My best friend's boyfriend counts as family to me."

With the hammer dropped, Matsuda's gang was in terror. Because it was now crystal clear that the certain death staring them in the face wasn't doing so over a mere case of mistaken identity.

"Sh-Shut the hell up!"

"Surround him, guys!"

"It's just some geezer! Nothin' to act scared of!"

With nowhere left to run, Matsuda's gang resorted to desperate measures and ganged up on the massive man... until he suddenly clenched his right fist and backhanded the wall right next to the doorway with all his might. It was just one blow, but the drywall now had a crater in it surrounded by a web of massive fissures.

"Geh..." was the boys' only response.

Matsuda's gang wailed, unable to take another step out of fear. How does a human fist come to contain such force? This karaoke shop might have been cheaply built, but its walls weren't the kind of thing you could pulverize with your bare hands. Even fools like these boys could understand, especially after all the punishment they'd given those walls just minutes earlier. This man's strength was on a different level from theirs; just making the comparison was a show of arrogance.

"I suggest you refrain from talking shit if you're simply going to wuss out."

Even in the face of Reina's scoffing and ridicule, they couldn't say a word back.

And with that, they had the living shit beaten out of them.

To Matsuda's gang, violence was just a part of daily life. They were blessed with large frames and athletic skills since childhood, so they could win fights without trying very hard. They found people weaker than them to prank and bully, and if they didn't like someone, they just kicked their butt. That's how they'd lived until now, and what they rubbed in everyone's faces.

But now... the barrage of brutality raining upon their flesh was something fundamentally different from the fights they had considered their specialty. This man didn't shout to intimidate his opponents. This man didn't resort to hackneyed threats. This was something Matsuda's gang didn't know, something they were entirely ignorant of. This was what could only be called *true* violence, and it was something far removed from the life

they'd lived.

Afterward...

The suspensions of Matsuda's gang ended after two weeks, right on schedule. However, all four of them happened to spend that day atop a hospital bed. It wouldn't be until after the end of summer vacation, the start of the second semester, that they would return to school like entirely changed men.

This was a world Kai needn't enter. And it would be a long, long time before that mysterious man appeared before him.

## Episode 007: Suppose a Real Monster from the Last Dungeon Basement Appeared in a Starter Town

It was now halfway through April. Kai's life continued in peace, as though the chaos of his first days as a second-year were just a fever dream. He played games with Jun, saw movies, shopped around at all the major otaku chains, and before he knew it, it was the day before Golden Week.

Right now, it was time to go to school. After getting off at Sakata Station, Kai caught a glimpse of Jun from behind. He figured that they must have been on the same train, just not the same car.

"Sup."

"Morning."

They walked the rest of the way to school together and talked about nothing but yesterday's quiz the whole time.

"Is it just me," said Jun, "or did math get way harder once we started our second year? I get the feeling I'm not quite keeping up in class..."

"Oh me oh my, do you mean to imply that you were able to keep up *last* year?"

"Screw you, Kai. You're getting friendly fired the next time we play *Tanks*."

"Blue name alert! We got a team killer here!"

Kai responded to Jun's teasing with a jab of his own before running away with a grin on his face.

"C'mon," Jun begged, slumping her shoulders more genuinely than Kai expected. "Can't you give me some actual help here?"

Asagi High School's academic style valued personal freedom, so teachers didn't nag about studying too often. But the school's code of conduct touted that personal responsibility was what made freedom a virtue, so the penalties for poor grades were harsh. They'd have midterms right after their return from Golden Week, so Kai could understand Jun's concern.

"But wouldn't you be better off asking our actual math teacher for help instead of me?"

"Hmm... maybe for other subjects, but that teacher and I don't really get along."

"Oh... right."

Kai realized he should have known better. Their math teacher was by no means a bad person, just... not a very forgiving one. Absolutely the straight-laced type. When she saw fashionistas like Jun, Reina, or Momoko, she tended to call them "hussies" as though they were her mortal enemies.

Asagi High School prided itself on... well, you know the drill. Its regulations on appearance were nothing if not lenient. You could color your

hair whatever shade you liked, and even piercings were fine if they weren't too flashy. Jun put effort into her appearance while staying within the rules, but when she tried to stand up for herself after being called a "hussy," all she got in return was an "I don't care." Kai had to take Jun's side on this one.

"Yeah, fair enough," Kai conceded. "Maybe we could do a study session during Golden Week?"

"In between our gaming sessions!"

"It'd be an all-day event if we did both."

"Thanks in advance for dinner!"

"Well, Mom would love to have company, so I guess it can work."

"Yay, I'm excited! Hurray for beef!"

"So you're already assuming we're gonna spring for that..." Well, not that Kai could claim he didn't want that for dinner, so he had to chuckle.

Jun gave him a big hug from behind out of gratitude. But given they were on their way to school and had the eyes of other students on them, she kept her embrace short, just enough to pass off as playing around. If they were too clingy in public, people might wonder if they were dating yet... or if they were just going at it like rabbits.

"Wanna come over tomorrow morning for it?"

"Totally!"

"If your parents are okay with it, you could even stay over. We've got my sister's bed, since I hear she's going on a trip with some friends from college."

"Yay! Now it's feeling like a training camp."

Jun had sparkles in her eyes... until she tilted her head.

"But wait, Kai, what about your job? I thought you couldn't get the whole week off."

"One of my coworkers got dumped by her boyfriend. She told me she wanted to drown her sorrows in work, so I've suddenly got more free time. The next three days, for starters."

"Sweet, so we've got a three-day gaming camp!"

"Study camp! Remember what you're coming for!"

"Kiddiiiiing. But we *are* gaming, right? I promise you won't take an acht-acht shot in your six!"

To show how harmless she was, Jun gave Kai another hug. A short one, of course. But this time, at this moment, his eyes met someone's. And there was no turning back. There, at the school gates a hundred meters away, stood the teacher on that day's entrance duty. A slender-faced gentleman whose beautiful looks could compete with Jun's, gender difference or not.

Royalteach was looking right at them. With unusual zeal.

"Oh, it's Broyalty," said Jun.

"Uh, what?!"



Kai could have sworn he'd heard a shocking revelation in the pun that came from the mouth of the girl currently clinging to him.

"Crap... I think we got caught at a bad time."

The next moment, Jun sheepishly distanced herself from Kai. He was breaking out in a cold sweat. A very bad feeling swelled in Kai's stomach as a very bad memory flashed across his mind.

*I have four brothers who are a lot older than me...*

*And every single one is the doting type...*

*That means having to listen to them nag, you know? Like about how I better not find a boyfriend or anything...*

*They'd definitely mistake you for a boyfriend. And then beat the crap out of you.*

*Wait, wait, wait, wait, Kai thought. There's no way—there's no way. It can't be.*

Kai hadn't forgotten how Royalteach saved him from Matsuda's gang. Nor did he forget how Royalteach stayed with him at the hospital, drove him home, understood his courage in not fighting back, promised that he'd be there when Kai needed him, and even shared a rousing conversation about the big three of shounen manga with him. It'd be an understatement to say that teachers as amazing as him didn't come along every day.

*So there's no way Royalteach could be Jun's brother!*

Kai wiped the sweat from his brow.

*I'm sure the fact that he's staring daggers at me is just some misunderstanding!*

Kai forced his rattling legs forward. And he fearfully asked Jun that fateful question.

"Is... he your brother?"

"Yup. My oldest one."

"The terminal sister complex one?"

"Yup. Loves me more than anything in the world."

*RIP me.* Kai gazed toward the heavens as the world unraveled around him.

"Hey, Ms. Purepure Miyakawa."

"Dude. Fine, what is it, Mr. Ash Nakamura?"

"Whichever of your parents was on naming duty has some *real* questionable tastes."

Crossing the Japanese kanji and the English pronunciation of "Prince" was just... a lot. Kai was shedding tears in his soul, but he made his spirit stay strong. He gradually, *casually* distanced himself from Jun and walked toward the school entrance as though he didn't even know her. He strained

to avoid eye contact with Royalteach, who stood with majesty before the gates. The other students greeted the gatekeeper with a smile as they passed, and he returned their salutations in kind.

"Mornin', Royalteach!"  
"Oh, morning."  
"Good morning, teacher."  
"Ah, morning."  
"How ya doin', Teach?"  
"Fine. I see you are as well."  
"Royalteach, listen, listen, listen!"  
"Haha, sorry, it'll have to wait."  
"Love you, Royalteach! ♥ ♥ ♥"  
"And I love my wife."  
"Fine mornin', ain't it?"  
"Sure is."  
"Gooooood morning!"  
"Morning."

Much of the massive flow of students shouted their greetings heartily as they entered the gates. Kai's mission: to blend into the crowd and make his way through!

"G-Good morning..."  
"Naaaaakaaaaamuuuuuraaaaa."

*Eeek!*

The sudden grip Kai felt on his shoulder made his heart stop. He nervously turned his head to find that Royalteach had snuck up behind him before he even noticed, horror-movie style. And his grip made it clear that he had no intention of letting go. He pulled up to Kai's ears and whispered in a way that sent shivers down his spine.

"I saw you, Nakamuraaaaa."  
"T-Truly a model teacher, always watching out for your students."  
"Soooo... you're friends with Jun, huuuh?"  
"Wh-Whoever could that be? I just *happened* to see a *classmate* whose name *I don't even know* and had a *wholesome* conversation."  
"You have *some* nerve clinging to *my* little sister!"  
"Teacher, please don't pulverize my shoulders! It hurts. I give!"  
"Whatever could you be referring to? Don't you see the smile on your teacher's face?"  
"I dunno, but I see murder in those eyes!"  
"Why yooooou, are you dating Jun?!"  
"Oh no, he's not gonna listen!"

Kai shrieked. Who would have thought that such a wonderfully understanding teacher would start seeing red the second it involved his sister? Terminal sister complexes were terrifying!

Kai searched his surroundings for anyone, anything that could save him, but to no avail. Royalteach was just (ostensibly) grabbing Kai's shoulder. He was even (ostensibly) smiling. The most that any passing student would do in reaction was point and smile, as though marveling at how close the two were. Even in this massive crowd, Kai was all alone... such apathy made clear to him the dark side of our self-interested modern society.

"C'mon, Broyalty, I think that's enough."

"Oh, Jun!" Kai exclaimed, "You're the only one I can count on!"

Kai's best friend, unable to bear witness to such inhumanity, came to his aid. Kai's loneliness vanished in a moment. It was then that Kai knew that modern society wasn't a total wash after all.

"Jun," Royalteach questioned, adopting the stern look of an overprotective brother. "Are you dating this guy?"

"No, not at all. He's just a good friend."

"Yeah, you heard her! *Friend*, got it?"

"Hmph. I find that hard to believe."

"Oh please, Broyalty. What could possibly give you that idea?"

"Yeah, you heard her! You're a teacher, so you should believe your students!"

"... You know, when I came to this school, I heard rumors that a school celebrity, Jun Miyakawa from class 2-1, had been cavorting with a boy she seemingly had her eye on. Many rumors, in fact. I could never believe that my little, innocent Jun could ever do such a thing, so I laughed it off as the sort of baseless gossip that kids often spread. But you, Nakamura... you *betrayed* me."

"Excuse me, when and how did I betray you?!"

Kai desperately worked to convince him that it was a misunderstanding. But of course, Royalteach wouldn't listen to a word of it. His eyebrows arched as far as they could go to convey his fearsome fury.

"I shall not acknowledge such cavorting!"

The shout was just like the one Matsuda bore the brunt of just a few days ago.

*Even though we're just friends?!*



And so, Golden Week began in the worst possible way. Kai rolled around on his bedroom mattress as he worked out the situation with Jun over LINE.

"Any luck over there?"

"Broyalty's still royally pissed."

"For real?"

"He's on watch to make sure I can't go to your place."

"Talk about some awful timing..."

With that message sent, Kai plowed his face into his pillow. Royalteach was married, so he normally lived with his wife in an apartment away from the family home. However, his prioritizing of his students over his responsibilities to his partner led to a legendary lovers' spat, resulting in his wife kicking him out to the proverbial doghouse. And so, he returned to the Miyakawa family home. To make matters worse, that "student" was apparently Kai, who Royalteach "prioritized" by staying with him at the hospital and driving him home. That was already enough to make Kai want to apologize on his hands and knees for causing their fight.

He wasn't a bad teacher. He was absolutely not a bad teacher. It was just that when his little sister got involved, well... let's just say a screw came loose.

"I could lie and say I'm going shopping with Reina," Jun suggested in a new message.

"It wouldn't solve the fundamental problem, though."

"Yeah, I can't fool him forever."

"Guess we'll have to call off the study session."

Jun responded with a LINE sticker of Umaru rolling around and throwing a tantrum. Kai sent a sticker of Bell saying "Now, now" to calm her down. Still, Kai wanted to get something constructive out of this.

"By the way, Jun, what do your parents think?"

Even if Royalteach was opposed to their friendship, it should be as good as solved if Jun's parents weren't. Jun didn't reply for a while; she must have been preparing a long answer.

"My parents are pretty busy with work, so my brothers basically act as my guardians—especially now that we're in Golden Week. My dad says he's gotta get everything settled at work before our family vacation, so he's stuck at the office and doesn't have time for me."

*Yep, thought Kai, doesn't look like they'll be much help.*

He groaned as he stared at his smartphone. For all the freedom that Asagi High School advertised itself on, it was pretty strict about inappropriate coed contact. It was one of those things that parents would never shut up about even if the school had no issues with it. The standard they settled on for "appropriate" was contact that had the approval of both guardians; meaning that regardless of what Kai and Jun felt or how long their friendship had lasted, the school would view it as "inappropriate" now that Jun's guardian, Royalteach, no longer approved. It pissed Kai off, but the rules were the rules, and breaking them would get Jun in trouble, too. Once again, Asagi High School's rules might have been lenient, but they were harsh when their standards weren't met.

"Do you think I could see Royalteach? Maybe we can talk this out."

With no other ideas to break through the deadlock, Kai sent one last suggestion. But the response didn't come immediately. Kai thought she might be unsure, so he sent a sticker of Saori Bajeena adjusting her glasses while saying "I shall lend my expertise!" to show his determination.

Time continued to pass, until finally, a response came.

"I don't want you getting beaten up again."

So. This is what she had spent all that time hesitating to say.

"Egh..." Kai blurted, immediately choking up at the thought.

The bruising he took after Matsuda's gang demanded he break up with Jun was still quite fresh in his mind. The absolute shock on Jun's face when she saw his injuries was even fresher. Kai couldn't imagine the sorrow it'd put her through to see that tragedy repeat itself at the hands of her own family...

Jun's next messages arrived before Kai could catch his breath. They came in a rapid flurry that gave a hint as to where her resolve lay.

"I'll do something about this."

"Everyone in my family will be along for our trip."

"I'll convince my brothers in front of Mom and Dad."

"So just wait until then."

It was just a few lines, but they made it clear that Jun had thought long and hard about this.

*I won't put you through that ever again, Kai.*

*I want to see you, too. I want to hang out together.*

*So I'll do what I can.*

*Trust me.*

Reading those messages warmed Kai's heart. He took a look at the calendar on top of the table and saw that today was April 27. He had heard that Jun's family vacation was between May 1 and May 3, so he'd need to be patient for a whole week before Jun could win over her parents.

"Got it."

Kai murmured to himself as he fiddled with his smartphone to send a sticker. It had Terminus Est saying "As you wish" with a smug, yet casual look on her face.

Without missing a beat, Jun responded with a sticker of Akiyama saying "Leave it to me!" Kai sent the sticker right next to Est's, a picture of Yukimura Kusunoki saying "Best of luck."

Jun's plans changed to having Royalteach help her with her math. However, Kai had his doubts that a social studies teacher who cut math from his life after the employment exam could be as reliable as Jun needed...



It might not bear repeating at this point, but Jun came over to Kai's place around five times a week. Which is to say that on average, they had two days a week to themselves. Maybe work or shopping trips got in the way, or maybe they had prior plans at school or at home. Sometimes their

schedules just didn't line up. So hey, this wasn't the first day off Kai had to spend without Jun. He was used to this.

Or so he thought.

"All right, let's get to gaming."

Why did his subconscious muttering to himself suddenly sound so hollow? He shook his head to clear out those pointless thoughts and turned on his PS4. The console version of *WoT's* sister game, a naval war game called *World of Warships*, finally released this month. Kai had saved his last bit of wages for this, so he planned to master it during Golden Week.

"If I start playing before Jun does, I can get good first. Heh, I'll have a head start."

Kai continued talking to himself as he created an account and started playing... until he got bored only thirty minutes later.

Well, not exactly *bored*, per se. He just couldn't focus for some reason. Even though he knew beginners had to give 110% when learning a competitive game, he just suffered shipwreck after shipwreck.

"Yep, these just don't handle the way tanks do. Looks like it'll take a lot of grinding for me to get used to 'em."

He didn't know who he was making excuses to, but he shut down the PS4 anyway.

"Okay, videos. Yeah, let's watch some videos."

Kai booted up the old laptop on his study desk. He saw that jyunjyun1203 AKA JJ had uploaded a new *Monster Hunter* solo hunt video late the previous night. Kai nearly jumped for joy as he smashed that play button.

The video's contents went in one ear... and out the other. Once Kai realized how spaced out he was, he dragged the progress bar back and watched the video again. And again. He couldn't get the dot to stop on the exact second he wanted; it always did that, of course, but this time it made him so frustrated that he couldn't focus. He gently closed his laptop lid in annoyance.

"All right, let's read a light novel. Good ol' LNs."

He took a stack of nearly ten freshly purchased paperbacks out of the bookstore's plastic bag. He bought these books with the intention of finishing all of them during Golden Week. The first one he reached for was none other than the start of a new series by his favorite author that had just gone on sale that April—a release that Kai had been waiting for with bated breath. Its title was *The Immortal Army Strikes Again and Again!*

Kai lay down on his bed, put a pillow under his belly, and engaged in maximum comfy mode as he began reading. His first step was to savor Yuunagi's godlike color illustrations. Ah, what a satisfying blend of euphoria and fulfillment.

Next, he dug into the text... until he realized that his hands just weren't turning the pages. After a few paragraphs, his attention would drift off. He'd read a little further, realize he didn't remember anything he'd just

read, try to reread a portion, then realize he didn't even remember where he stopped.

"Gaaaaaaah, everything's booooooring!" Kai shouted, tossing his paperback aside on the bed—a barbarism he'd normally never treat his light novels with. He glanced at the clock in his room; it was 2 p.m.

"...Geez, that early?"

This year was a ten-day-straight Super Golden Week, making this first day the gateway to a world of endless hopes and possibilities. And Kai was already bored.

Such stifling ennui continued the next day.

And the next.

"And playing alone was all I did until middle school..."

Kai could do nothing but lie sprawled atop his bed and stare at the posters plastered to the ceiling. In particular, a *Goblin Slayer* piece drawn by the god Noboru Kannatsuki, featuring the show's four main girls frolicking affectionately in their swimsuits.

It wasn't like Kai was a complete lone wolf in those days. He had friends like Kishimoto to share his hobbies with... but obviously, they didn't spend every day together the way he did with Jun. Otaku hobbies tended to be solitary pursuits, so Kai didn't mind too much back then.

But that was then, and this was now. He had changed. He met Jun, someone who was like the other pea in a pod to him. He came to know the ultimate joy of sharing one's otaku interests with a friend. He never dreamed that going without seeing her would be all it took to make life this excruciating.

And so came the day after that, the final day of April. Kai had the noon shift at work. He left for his commute in the hopes that getting some work done might lessen his boredom. He arrived in the break room, took out his work apron, and sluggishly tied it around his waist. Just then...

"Why, Nakamura. I completed my reading of that thing the other day."

Kai's coworker, Kotobuki, called to him from behind. She had the opening shift, so she was currently taking her noon break by chowing down on a homemade lunch. Kai had actually felt someone's eyes on him earlier, but he ignored her since he couldn't muster the energy to talk if she didn't engage first. Now that she had made the first move, he could respond in the same rigid, yet lacking-in-vigor tone he always used with her.

"And whatever might 'that thing' be referring to, Kotobuki?"

"It refers to the soccer manga you sung the praises of."

"My, how rare for you of all people to take interest in a sporting work. And a manga, no less."

"Works such as the recent *Tsurune* and *Run with the Wind* may be about sports, but are not to be underestimated... though I admit I viewed their animated adaptations."

"Quite the shows, they are!" said Kai. "But I could have sworn you weren't the type to partake in manga."

"I was merely concerned about cost efficiency since manga can be read so quickly. I picked this one up only because my younger brother happened to possess it."

"May I inquire as to your impressions?"

"Speaking frankly, it was awesome. The main character seems to have quite the mojo," said Kotobuki.

"...Mayhaps you could explain in a way I could understand?"

"Unlike the average sports anime, I felt that the girls were positively adorable."

"Ah, I absolutely concur!" replied Kai. "Even that suntanned lady who only showed up for a moment was exquisite."

"Indeed. Although I personally am on Team Hana."

"Not Team Anri?"

The two looked into each other's eyes as sparks flew from their gazes. But Kotobuki soon shut her eyelids, as though this was a digression she'd meant to avoid. She cleared her throat and continued.

"It was an awesome manga, but I do have one complaint. Of course, this is merely a personal qualm."

"If I may be so bold."

"The romantic scenes were a tad too irritating. I was unable to rid myself of the sense that the protagonist could have made something work had he taken merely one more step. Hana being so cute simply makes one all the more impatient."

"I suppose you have a point."

"One. More. Step," Kotobuki repeated, emphasizing the message she really wanted to send. "That was all he needed to take."

This gave Kai a realization.

"...Are you psychic?" he asked, finally being brought back to his senses.

Kotobuki gave a cocky "Hmph" in response. The obnoxious, triumphant look on her face was the kind Kai knew her for. "I may not know the reason, but I can tell from a glance that you're dragging your feet over yet another concern."

"Whoa... I must be super easy to read..."

"And you'd do well to remember it."

Kai couldn't say a word to her haughty sarcasm. She might be obnoxious, but Kai just couldn't bring himself to hate her. This girl's fragile emotional stability had made her an expert at watching others, and she always brought that talent to Kai's aid.

After a deep sigh, Kai untied his apron, stuffed it back into the locker, and replaced it with the messenger bag he brought from home.



"Nakamura?" inquired Kotobuki.

"I've gotta go take one more step," responded Kai. He relaxed his shoulders and gave his thanks.

"Are you certain it's the correct decision?"

"Yep. But uh, what do I tell the manager?"

"Simple, you have a sudden stomachache and can't work. I'll be certain to cover your share of the shift." Kotobuki's smug smile made Kai's eyes widen.

"You sure that'll work?" He couldn't help but worry about this newbie coworker.

"But of course," said Kotobuki, straining to hold her head high. "Who the hell do you think I am? After all, it was you who taught me everything I know."

"Why, touché!" exclaimed Kai, breaking out in a grin. "I'll take your word for it, Kotobuki."

"Perhaps you'd consider repaying this kindness?"

"I'll think of something later."

"I eagerly await it."

They made a familiar exchange as Kai exited through the back door. He took out his phone and tried to contact Reina over LINE as he made a mad dash outside. Thankfully, today was still April 30.



"Juuuuuuuuuuuuuuun!" Kai shouted by the front gates. "Let's plaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay!"

He felt like he'd reverted to a child. Before him was a typical stand-alone house. A two-story building, not unlike Kai's own home, except this one belonged to the Miyakawa family. It was Kai's first time here, but Reina told him the address over LINE.

"Juuuuuuuuuuuuuuun, let's plaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaay!"

"Don't shout my name so loud! You'll embarrass me to the whole neighborhood!"

The house's front door swung open, revealing Jun and her furious expression. Her chastising left her breathing heavily.

"Well, I was worried you might not hear me."

"Well guess what, I can! I just need at least *one* minute to put some darn clothes on!"

Now that she mentioned it, Jun was wearing just an extra-large T-shirt like it was a dress. This attire was far more feral—er, *free*—than Kai was used to. The straps of her bra also peeked out from the wide collar. Kai's sister was firmly in the no-bra camp of comfiness, but he figured that going au naturel had to be more tiring once you reached Jun's size.

"Geez, I *told* you I'd handle it for a reason. Of course you'd come anyway..." Jun pursed her lips. It was a pose Kai recognized—the one that said she was secretly happy. "I swear, Kai, that part of you is so boyish."

"Whatever that means."

"Anyway, why not come in? Just, uh, make sure you run away if you're about to get clocked."

Kai paid no mind to her threats as he waltzed on in. If he let this day slip past, then the Miyakawas would leave on their family vacation, and Kai would be stuck agonizing over it for three days. Like hell he was running away.

The foyer had a distinctly regal feel to it, partially from the mix of Eastern and Western architectural aesthetics, and partially from the imposing stance of Royalteach as he stood smack-dab in the middle of it. Sure enough, he wore a well-pressed dress shirt and slacks as though they were battle armor, weekend or not. Given how loud Kai had been, his sudden springing into action came as no surprise. He stared Kai down from the step above the concrete entryway atop which Kai stood. Jun might not have meant to ask "why not come in?" as a question, but Royalteach clearly intended to be the answer.

"I told you I didn't approve of your cavorting with my little sister, did I not? Nakamura, you do understand that words mean things, correct?"

Royalteach crossed his arms like a big shot as he took a stab at sarcasm. Kai didn't take off his shoes. He stood his ground, stared back, and said:

"I just came to *hang out* with a *friend*. What's the problem with that?"

Kai didn't mean to say that as a taunt, but it sure sounded like one. He didn't come all this way to beat around the bush. He wasn't leaving with just the *sense* that he could've made something work.

"You have *some* nerve, Nakamuraaa."

A vein surged on Royalteach's forehead. This was where the battle would begin. Jun held her breath to watch over them...

The curtain lifted upon the duel of wits between Kai and Royalteach.

"You merely came to visit a friend, you say? In broad daylight?"

"Of course. It's the truth, after all."

"If you want to lie, I suggest you come up with something less laughable! Who would ever believe such a slapdash excuse?"

"Well, Teacher, what do you base your theory that I'm dating Jun on? You can't tell me you seriously took gossip at face value, can you? Of course not; teaching is such a venerable position that it'd be an insult to imply that."

"I'll have you know I did my research! You're together with Jun almost every day after school, aren't you? Jun's the one visiting your house. Who would do such a thing other than lovers?!"

"I don't know. That sounds an *awful* lot like a personal bias. Is it *that* strange for close friends to spend every day together?"

"You're a boy, and Jun is a girl!"

"Why, if I didn't know better, I'd say you're suggesting that men and women can't possibly be friends. Are you *sure* you don't have a personal bias here?"

"...Look. My little Jun is ridiculously cute. You're not going to tell me I'm alone here."

"Oh no, I agree that she's super cute."

"I've got you! Fool that you are, you admit it outright! Nakamura, your ulterior motives are clear for all to see! When faced with someone as cute as Jun, no man could resist the urge to make her their girlfriend! A hungry wolf cannot resist the allure of a fresh cut of meat! High school boys are nothing more than beasts! I know. I've been a high school boy before!"

"You're kidding! Men aren't complete barbarians! No matter how cute Jun is, we can still maintain our dignity!"

"Your theory might hold for *typical* cuteness, but not for the *ridiculous* cuteness of Jun!"

"Jun may indeed be the cutest girl on the planet, but my point still stands!"

Kai was howling. His shouts wouldn't be deterred by Royalteach's unyielding resolution.

Meanwhile, Jun grew redder at each consecutive blow they traded as she scrambled to get a word in. "Okay, I get it!" "I'm cute, I get the point!"

"Please just leave it at that, I beg you!" "Awawawah..."

Sadly, Kai and Royalteach were too focused on their duel to pay her any mind.

"Then can I ask *you* something, Teacher?"

This was it. Kai funneled his concentration into this one counterattack.

"What is it? It's a teacher's duty to answer a student's questions."

"You're super popular with the girls at school, aren't you?"

"...Fortunately, yes, I am. However, I try not to leave any boys behind."

"So, you're aware that a ton of girls have the hots for you."

"What a vile turn of phrase!"

"If you're *such* a hit with the ladies, then it's an all-you-can-eat buffet for you, isn't it? You could have your pick of *any* girl in school, can't you?"

"Wha... How preposterous! Don't you dare joke about that! No teacher would even consider putting his hands on a student!" Royalteach's face instantly flushed, as though he took the very insinuation as a disgrace.

"But aren't all men *beasts*? Aren't we *all* hungry wolves?"

Assured in the strength of his assault, Kai assumed the expression of a fool as he haughtily picked apart Royalteach's argument. The ever-annoying Momoko proved an excellent mental model for this move.

"I'm a grown adult! Don't compare me to a brat in the throes of puberty!"

"Soooo, *that's* why you say it's only natural for you to hold on to your dignity, hmm?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying!"

Royalteach was dead serious, from his expression to his shouts. He really was a good teacher; he was sincere even when talking to a high schooler. That's why Kai had to get real. He did away with the cheap shocks to hide his own faults and the provocative acting. He laid his whole heart bare as he got serious, too.

"Well, I don't want you insulting me, either!"





Kai laid his cards on the table with a scream from the soul. Royalteach was taken aback, but Kai continued to drive it home.

“Jun is cute. She’s *ridiculously* cute. Probably the cutest girl in the world. But I’ve never once thought of her as my girlfriend. That’s because Jun is my *friend*! Because being her friend is *way* better than being her lover!”

Kai was heaving, his body almost taking the metaphor of “spilling your guts” too literally. Looking back, a lot had happened that April. Reina told Kai that he “didn’t deserve Jun.” And Kotobuki gave him the advice that Reina “must be mistaking him and that girl friend of his for lovers.” Thanks to them, Kai understood.

*Boyfriends and girlfriends are a pain in the aaaaaaaaaaass. Being friends is like a million times better!*

It was thanks to this realization that Kai could stand here and defend himself so concisely. That he could defy Royalteach’s assumptions.

*We’re just friends! But being friends is the reason we get along better than lovers!*

Yes, this was something he could shout with his head held high. He said everything that needed to be said. You could shake him down, but not another word would come out. Meaning that, uh, he didn’t quite know what to do if he had to argue any further. He wouldn’t know what to do, but he at least knew he wouldn’t lose for lack of trying.

He glared at Royalteach with his chest puffed out, waiting for the man acting as Jun’s guardian to reply. Before he realized it, Jun had come to his side. The two exchanged glances, their eye contact serving as a nod to each other.

As for Royalteach, his answer would be...



Mr. Prince, also known as Prince Miyakawa, married at the age of 26. He passed the Teacher Employment Examination, graduated college, scrambled between posts at public high schools as a temp teacher, got stuck on standby, and amidst all this hustle and bustle, woke up one day to find himself at that age. Fortunately, it was then that he was hired as a full-time teacher, so his lifestyle finally settled down. That was reason enough for him to propose to his longtime girlfriend.

He met her through a college club when they were both first-years. They began as just friends, but their hearts warmed up to the idea of romance as

time went on. Finally, in the summer of their second year, Prince asked her out. They'd been together ever since.

Although... that's not to say they didn't have their differences. They only continued living together after graduation out of convenience. As for the proposal, Prince only did it out of his obligation as a man. The flame of romance had gone out long ago.

As the years went on, the woman who became his wife began to let more of her complaints slip out. Being a full-time public school teacher meant her husband was always busy; coming home late was the norm, which cut heavily into the time they could spend together as a couple. She made sure to let him know how displeased she was about it.

"What do you love more, your job or me?" went one of her typical gripes. "You know I'm a woman, right? Not your personal maid, right?" went another, more sarcastic one.

"I'm fully aware," Prince would badly want to shout back, "but teaching is a higher calling!"

However, he always held his tongue. He knew that raising his voice would mean the end of their marriage.

Prince first took an interest in Asagi High when Jun said she was taking entrance exams for a private school. When he looked into it, he found that they had plenty of teachers on staff, ensuring a lighter workload for each one. Its employment exam was difficult, but after studying like mad all over again, he officially became one of Asagi's new hires. His job now demanded less of his time than his public school work did, leaving him with more of it to spend with his wife. Finally, he had the happy family he needed to breathe a sigh of relief... or so he thought.

Caring for Kai after he was attacked by his classmates counted as working overtime, causing Prince to abandon his dinner plans with his wife and put him right back on her bad side. Prince didn't think he did anything wrong, and of course he had no regrets about helping Kai, so this was the one time he talked back to his furious wife. A fight ensued, resulting in him getting put in the proverbial doghouse.

And now *this* had to happen. Kai Nakamura, the boy who stole the heart of Prince's little sister right from under his nose, had the nerve to act like he was turning the tables as he shouted at the top of his lungs:

"Being her friend is *way* better than being her lover!"

To be honest, it struck a nerve. It forced him to think about those days just after he'd first met his wife. The days when they were just friends. Every moment they spent together back then was truly filled with bliss. Even after they officially became an item a year and a half later, he was still happy and fulfilled.



But soon after, the spark was gone. And without that, it was all over. Now that he thought about it, the majority of the 11 years he spent with her had been rather dull. The *vast* majority.

Would it have ended differently had they neither married nor dated and simply stayed friends? Could they have continued having fun all this time? Prince didn't keep up with many of his old college buddies, but he still had a few. Even fewer of them were women, but that was better than none.

"..."

Maybe he'd just been trying not to think about it.

"... .."

But Kai forced him to do so.

"... .."

That's why he had to...



"... .."

Silence. And a lot of thought. Royalteach still stared Kai down, but his mouth was stretched into a straight line. Eventually, those stiff lips separated. Kai held his breath in anticipation as he listened with Jun.

"I understand your point, Nakamura."

It was almost enough to make Kai want to strike a victory pose.

"However, it's still a point made by a brat. It's only a matter of time before your dignity loses to your instincts, and I assure you that you're not a good judge of when that'll happen."

"Broyalty, come *on*! You're being unreasonable!"

"Jun, stay out of this!" Royalteach shouted, shutting down Jun's attempt at providing backup. Kai had to step forward himself.

"I think it's a little disrespectful to keep calling me a 'brat.' What am I supposed to say to that?"

"That's exactly my point," said Royalteach as he flashed an indomitable grin. "There's nothing you *can* say. Nakamura, if you want to convince me that you're not a brat... you'll have to *prove* it."

"Y-Y-You don't mean a f-f-fight, right?!" Kai stammered, immediately flying into a panic. He recalled that Jun *did* tell him to run away if he was about to get clocked. He could call himself the Ten-Thousand Punch Legend all he wanted, but he couldn't hide his shaking knees. However, to his surprise...

"You idiot, don't be ridiculous. A teacher would never hit a student." Royalteach's grin turned to a frown as he chastised Kai for jumping to the wrong conclusion. He continued, "I hear from Jun that you've got quite the skills."

Royalteach reached into the pocket of his slacks and whipped something out.

It was... a Switch.

"Do you always walk around with that?!"

"As any man should."

Kai blurted out the first thing that came to mind, and Royalteach responded in a way that made it hard to tell if he was joking.

"Well... I can't deny that every man should." Kai took him up on his challenge and pulled out his own Switch from his messenger bag.

"Ah, so you brought yours, Nakamura."

"Of course. I came to play video games at my friend's house, after all."

"Ah yes, of course you did." Royalteach's gaze sharpened as though he had found a worthy opponent. "Very well; come inside. We'll do battle with these."

"So, you just need to see my skills, right?" Following the direction Royalteach jerked his chin in, Kai took off his shoes and stepped inside. It was his first time entering Jun's home.

"Hold on! Broyalty, this is nuts. Kai, don't go along with this."

"C'mon," said Kai, shaking his head at Jun's concerns. "We're just gonna play a video game. It's not like anyone's gonna get hurt."

"Geez, you're letting your ego go to your head again... Well fine, just don't blame me for whatever happens!"

Jun pursed her lips. This time, she was exasperated for real. Still, she stayed by his side, making it clear who she was rooting for.

Their duel would take place in the living room. Kai sat down on the cushion Royalteach pulled out for him and faced his opponent. They sat head to head, close enough to let them check each other's screens and make sure no cheating was going on.

Jun sat next to Kai, of course, making a statement that she'd fight for him even if it meant defying her own brother. Royalteach pouted a bit after seeing his sister oppose him, but his face quickly grew stern as he sat cross-legged and made his declaration of war.

"The game will be *Monster Hunter GU*. The match will be decided by who can complete the Hellblade Glavenus G5 quest the quickest."

"...That's a pretty tough mission to handle solo. Sure you're up to it, Teacher?"

Honestly, Kai wasn't even sure *he* was up to it. The mission was so hard that hitting the three-faint limit and failing was a real possibility. Kai hadn't played an *MH* besides *World* in quite a while, so could an adult who didn't have the time to obsess over games possibly keep up?

"Hmph. Don't underestimate an *MH* veteran." Royalteach's indomitable grin returned. It reminded Kai of when this teacher told Matsuda's gang not to bite off more than they could chew.

"Be careful," warned Jun. Even she was taking this seriously. "Broyalty's the one who taught me *Monster Hunter*. He's good."

*All the more reason why I can't slack off*, thought Kai as he put his game face on. He powered up his Switch, selected *MHGU*, and logged in with his account. Once the game started, he carefully balanced his equipment loadout for a time-attack run. He had put a ton of time into this game, so there was no item he lacked.

"You're gonna go with water-element weapons, right?" asked Jun.

"Yep. I'm running Dual Blades."

"So the Plesioth Machetes might be a better choice over the Deviant Mizutsune weapons."

"Yep. That's what suits my playstyle."

Kai and Jun sat in front of the small screen of the portable game console and discussed their strategy. Mr. Sister Complex still looked cocksure, but he was better off ignored.

"Gonna use the Hellblade set for armor?"

"Maybe, but I want some more skills, so I wanna customize it a bit," Kai told Jun.

"Like for Repeat Offender?"

"...Yeah. That's gonna be critical."

He replaced the head armor with a piece from a Gunner's set and equipped a Kushala Cista GX to his torso. This gave him the defense he needed as well as access to some powerful DPS skills.

"Oh, but Kai, you're giving up Divine Blessing..."

"It won't matter for a challenge like this!"

Kai gave a fiery rebuke to Jun's worries as he set his style to "Adept." But his fingers stopped when it came time to choose his Hunter Art.

"I could pick Wolf's Maw III to get more damage output..."

"Absolute Evasion is what I'd pick," said Jun. Her firm suggestion was to choose safety over a high-risk, high-reward attack. The two had been through hell and back in this game, so her advice came from the perspective of a reliable partner who knew his habits inside and out. This counsel was worth its weight in gold, and Kai would do well to heed it.

"Yeah, a first-rate hunter knows better than to overestimate their skills." Kai no longer hesitated to set his Hunter Art to Absolute Evasion. All that remained was to pick his items.

"Got your Cool Drinks?"

"Okay, got 'em."

"And Dash Juice?"

"I have some Megs."

"Energy Drinks?"

"Dash Juices have that covered."

"Ah, fair. So, just need your Potions and Max Potions?"

"I'll bring what I need to combine for them."

"Don't forget your Book of Combos, then."

"Okay, got it."

The careless mistake of forgetting to bring vital items on a quest was a common occurrence in *MH*, so Jun helped Kai double-check to ensure that didn't happen. Royalteach spent the whole time making comments like "You two get along better than I thought..." or "Hey, maybe mind your personal space?" or "If you're just showing off then I *swear*." It was hard to tell if he was just nagging or actually complaining, but Kai and Jun didn't hear a word of it. They were lost in their own little world.

"...Are you *ready*, Nakamura?"

Hence why Kai couldn't imagine the reason behind Royalteach's disgruntled look when he finally asked that question.

"Yeah!"

Kai just gave an earnest response. Jun's constant assistance made his answer brim with confidence.

"...Okay then, go accept the quest."

"You got it!"

Kai headed to the Hunter's Hub to meet up with Royalteach, who had finished his preparations long ago.

*...On second thought, maybe I should get a look at Teacher's equipment first.*

Kai squinted hard at the screen. Hey, if you knew the enemy and knew yourself, you didn't need to fear the result of a hundred battles. Royalteach made no attempt to hide his Switch, so Kai took a look over at his screen.

And he found something he couldn't believe.

"Ah... aaaaah... aaaaagghhh," Kai subconsciously wailed, dumbfounded. It was that surprising. It was that much of a jaw-dropper. He just wanted to see what loadout Royalteach would take into this ultra-difficult quest out of curiosity and competitive spirit, but what he saw his opponent wearing was...

A lance. And not a single piece of armor.

"No... No way... It can't be... It can't be true..." Kai was so rattled that he couldn't think straight.

"Calm down, Kai! It's one of Broyalty's mind games!"

If Jun hadn't tried her hardest to snap Kai out of it, he might have lost before the battle even began. The sight shook his composure just that much.

Of all loadouts to use, he picked armorless lance? Against the absolute monstrosity known as the Hellblade, he used *armorless lance*? Does this man fear not even the wrath of God?

"Teacher, are you insane?!"

"Oh, I'm quite sane. But I *am* the adult here, so I'm offering my student a handicap."

"Teacher... you're a fearsome man!"

Kai looked like the dictionary definition of shock and awe. Jun tried to snap back at her brother that trying to show off with an armorless loadout wasn't very mature at all, but Kai was too overheated to hear a word of it.

"All right, Nakamura, let's begin!"

"R-Right!"

With his spirit completely enervated, Kai started the quest like he was a yes-man following orders. His mind and body were in tatters, but he still downed a Cool Drink and Mega Dash Juice before heading off to face the Deviant Glavenus on Ingle Isle.

Sadly, that was as much as he could accomplish. He could barely keep playing.

*I gotta know what's up with the armorless lance stuff!*

Could someone really beat the Hellblade wearing that, or was it just an ignorant adult's bluff? Kai found himself forgetting about his own hunt as he grew engrossed in Royalteach's play.

To make a long story short, Royalteach was far more monstrous than the Hellblade. He Insta-blocked every hit of the Deviant's ferocious attacks! And after every flawlessly timed parry, he counterattacked with a brutal cross slash! He might have been in his character's birthday suit, but he was floating like a butterfly and stinging like a bee. One mistake would have been all it took to send Royalteach right back to the base camp, but it didn't seem like he'd make it any time soon. Kai was spellbound by his expert technique!

*This guy's playing like he's JJ*, thought Kai. His first thought was that he didn't stand a chance of winning, but he soon reached his second thought. With trepidation—great trepidation, at that—he looked over at the name hovering above the avatar Royalteach was controlling.

"jyunjyun1203"

The same name as the video uploader that Kai had been admiring for the past five years.

*You're kidding! There's no waaaaaay!*

Kai whipped his face away from the screen and pleaded to Jun with his eyes.

"Yes way," said Jun, wiping away Kai's disbelief as a sheepish smile crept on her face. That would explain why she warned him not to blame her for whatever happened. She continued by explaining where Royalteach's handle came from.

“My name can be pronounced as ‘Junjun,’ and my birthday is December 3.”

“Oh man, he really *is* terminal!”

It was the real deal. JJ showed up in the last place Kai expected to find him. Kai’s eyes were glued to the live performance of skill from his long-admired Let’s Player. He was practically on his hands and knees in worship.

The godlike hunter displayed on screen known as “jyunjyun1203” sent every interloping Glavenus to their grave.

“Well, that’ll do,” said Royalteach as he heaved a long sigh after completing his hunt. Indeed, for a player on his level, the armorless lance was probably a *tactical* choice to sharpen his focus to the extreme. That was why he didn’t seem to notice a thing Kai did as he was playing.

“So, Nakamura, how goes your hunt?” he eventually asked. Royalteach didn’t need to pay attention to look completely assured of his victory.

Kai grinned, gave a thumbs up, and exclaimed, “I triple carted ages ago!”

Royalteach was taken aback for a moment, but responded, “...So, it’s safe to say that I’m the victor, correct?”

“Sure is! I could never hope to beat you, JJ!”

Kai confirmed it without hesitation, his grin never fading for a moment. He might have lost, but he just couldn’t help it. Not after he put the pieces together. The man named Prince Miyakawa, the teacher who saved him from Matsuda’s gang, the *Monster Hunter* legend he had nothing but respect for, was a good guy deep down. He was everything Kai could have hoped for.

The conditions of their duel said it all. Royalteach told Kai only to “prove” himself. He never said anything about barring the two from meeting again if Kai lost. When you’re as good as JJ, you know full well you’re going to win. Not adding that condition was a subtle sign of Royalteach’s kindness, his manliness. That’s why Kai smiled so broadly in spite of his loss.

“Now that our duel’s over with, please play with me, JJ! Let’s do Special Permit Glav! C’mon, it’s Glav!”

“Okay, look... You’re supposed to be a bit more persistent, maybe asking for a rematch...”

“I’ll totally prove myself if you join a party with me! I’ve had a lot of experience covering for Jun’s dodging mistakes as a top-notch wide-area support, so trust me!”

“...”

Royalteach was left speechless at Kai’s incessant demands to play.

“Hold on,” Jun interjected. “Lemme join too!”

“Yeah, Jun, go get your Switch!”

Jun cheerfully hopped out of the living room and dashed up the stairs to prep for their three-player hunt. Meanwhile, Royalteach's jaw was still on the floor.

"H-Huh? You're not gonna join up?"

"...Our duel is over, is it not? So go home."

"JJ, I've always admired your mad skills! I wanna play together at least once!"

"Mgh..."

"Please! It's my one wish!"

"...Just know that I can't control a monster's behavior if I'm not playing solo."

"So, gonna put some armor on this time?"

"...Don't be ridiculous. If I did, I'd clear the hunt far too quickly for it to be any fun."

Royalteach was getting a little brash, but at least he was committing to play with them.

"You're a real handful..." he griped, but the fact that he was still joining along was a sign that he was a gamer before all else. In a real war, yesterday's enemies could never be today's friends. That's why video games own!

"Ahhh, it's an honor to go on a hunt with the legendary JJ. Also, we're cool if I accidentally trip you, right?"

"Don't you *dare*."

As they chatted, Jun returned in a hurry with her Switch. Kai accepted the Special Permit quest, and before long, the three were on the hunt. Royalteach's moves were as smooth as always, but the other two were letting their rust show. They made massive mistakes and had massive laughs over them. Royalteach raged whenever they hit him in-game—he was less mature than he let on. But it was all part of the experience, one they'd look back on with smiles.

They paid no attention to the time as they played for who knows how long. Until eventually, the hands of the clock pointed out that it was six at night. Figuring it was a good stopping point, Royalteach stood up.

"Teacher?"

"I remembered I have plans with my wife."

"Huh? I don't remember you saying anything about that...?"

"I just remembered!"

With his exclamation made, Royalteach walked toward the exit. Leaving Kai and Jun alone. Wait, for real?!

"You can have my share of dinner, Nakamura. Just heat it up in the microwave."

Royalteach turned back with his hand on the doorknob, as though he just remembered to mention this. Jun, unsure of what in the world had gotten

into her brother, was just as confused as Kai. Royalteach didn't seem to pay their concerns any mind.

"Your curfew is at 9 p.m., got it? My brothers won't be coming home tonight... but don't take my trust for granted, Nakamura."

"R-Right!" agreed Kai on reflex after Royalteach sternly drove the point home. That's why it took him a moment to process the meaning of the words he said.

*Huh? Wait, what? Can I really stay that late, eat a meal, and just go home? 'Take his trust for granted,' meaning... he trusts me?!*

Kai wasn't able to show Royalteach anything close to the skill expected of him, so he didn't have a clue what was going on...



*Nakamura, you look like you haven't the faintest idea of what's going on,* thought Prince. The look on Kai's face when he turned around after reaching the doorknob gave him a silent chuckle. To tell the truth, he had long since accepted their relationship. That boy did say that being her friend was way better than being her lover, after all.

Kai's outburst really did strike a nerve and convince him that there was nothing improper going on between them, but Prince was too proud to accept it on the spot; being told off by a brat pissed him off. Bringing up the duel and Hellblade hunt nonsense was merely an excuse. Prince's plan to tear Kai to shreds in *Monster Hunter*, his specialty, had no greater purpose beyond taking out his frustration.

What epiphany was Prince supposed to have about Kai over a silly game? Games have value because they're merely a form of play, not because they can settle real-life disputes. Prince knew this because he was a gamer to his core.

Besides, what else was he supposed to do after they made him listen to their way-too-personal strategy meeting? How could someone *possibly* get between that?!

Anyway, long story short: Prince lost the actual duel to settle their dispute the moment he accepted their relationship. The sheer force of Kai's will won him the day.

*Still, I suppose I have to admit that Nakamura's quite the gamer.*

Thinking back on it, Prince had to laugh. He knew he had been rather cruel in forbidding their relationship. Yet Kai didn't hold a grudge; he just wanted to play. It was quite the surprise, one that left Prince's jaw on the floor at how genuine their bond was. Maybe someone had to be a boy like that to keep his wits about him around Prince's dear little sister.

Kai was still a brat, but he was certainly an interesting one. An impressive one. One that Prince absolutely, positively wanted to defeat next time. Of course, he didn't care in the slightest about wins or losses in a game. He wanted to win on the stage of real-life disputes.



Again, Kai's bluster bore repeating: "Being her friend is *way* better than being her lover!" It was an ideal that Prince could get behind. But he wasn't going to let a losing streak stand. He wasn't going to let his childish retaliation born out of jealousy be the end of it. He'd have the last word. Maybe next time, maybe later than that, but he would one day boast to his dear sister and her interesting friend:

"Being spouses is *way* better than being friends!"

To that end, Prince had no further business staying at the family home. He had an apartment—a lovers' nest—to return to and a wife to make up with.



Royalteach had really left. Kai and Jun were left alone in the Miyakawa household. It had to be a trap, right? He was gonna come back in no time, shout something about inappropriate relationships, then start breathing fire or something, right? Kai was cautious of the possibility at first, but his fears proved unfounded.

"Phew, that's a load off my back."

"Yeah, that's a load off mine, too."

The two relaxed before laughing together like idiots. They only stopped once Jun's smartphone rang with a notification.

"I got a LINE from Broyalty."

"What'd he say?"

"He asked if you're free on Sunday the 12th."

"Well, I am..."

"He asked if you wanted to come by our place then. The three of us could all play together."

"Who'da guessed he's a softie at heart?"

"Not me. I never thought Broyalty had that side to him."

"Wait, why's he sending a text when he could have just told us to our faces?"

"He's probably shy."

"At *his* age? No way."

"Yes way. Broyalty's the type to spout cheesy lines one after another if left on his own."

"I can see it. It's hilarious."

Kai nodded as he thought back to the monologue Royalteach went on while driving back from the hospital and just about everything he said today.

"He's a natural. But once he's aware of it, he gets super flustered."

"Guess he put his stats into being a glass cannon."

"Right? Isn't my brother super lame?"

"Definitely! Sure is handsome, though!"

The two laughed again with no end in sight.

"Would you like to eat? Or would you like to game?" asked Jun in between their cackles.

"Games gotta come first!"

"Would you like to play *Mario Kart*? Or would you like to play *Splatoon*?"

"I'm definitely in an *MH* mood. I'm fired up. I've gotta get back into shape by the 12th!"

"Ah, here comes Kai's competitive side."

"Hey now, *MH* is a co-op game!"

And with that, the two took their Switches out of sleep mode with friendly smiles on their faces.

These were the days Kai spent with his friend, a girl named Jun. And this day in particular made him certain that they'd continue for a long time to come.





## Epilogue

May 3. The year's Super Golden Week was now well into its latter half. And unfortunately, Kai had a shift at his job. He worked hard, but he took every break to message Jun over LINE while she was on her family trip. He'd sit down at the break room table and immediately tap away at his phone.

Jun, who was currently at Izumo Airport, sent a sticker of a penguin saying "I'm on my way home!" as it waddled along. Kai responded with a sticker of Yotsuba saying "Welcome back." Jun continued with text messages.

"I got you a souvenir."

"Thx!"

"When're you free?"

"10."

"That's late!"

To calm Jun down from her anger at not being able to give him her gift, Kai sent a sticker of Eiji Shinozuka and Kazuyoshi Morino putting their hands together and saying, "Our sincerest apologies!" He also sent a message with it: "I'm off work tomorrow."

"So, can I be over in the morning?"

"Okay. Let's play *Warships*."

"Is it good?"

"Yeah, in a different way from *Tanks*."

"Okay, top player, gimme some tips next time!"

Kai replied to Jun's self-serving request by chuckling and making clear that he had just started playing, too. Once he hit send...

"It's quite the relief to see you back to your cheerful self, Nakamura," said Kotobuki from across the table. She had just gone on break too. Kai paused his conversation with Jun by telling her that a coworker wanted to speak with him and responded, "You can tell?"

"You tend to let your emotions appear on your face."

"Well, I have you to thank, Kotobuki. Your guidance proved to be quite enlightening."

"Why, thank you."

Kotobuki huffed with pride. Kai had to snicker at how he couldn't bring herself to hate her no matter how obnoxious she got. He continued, "Ah yes, speaking of which, I suppose I ought to show my appreciation." He did promise to repay her kindness for both the time she listened to him talk about Reina and the time she pushed him to talk it out with Royalteach.

"How about getting some good food to eat?"

"A suggestion I'm not opposed to. However..."

Kai figured she would've jumped at the chance, but Kotobuki shook the head atop her dainty neck left and right.

"...There happens to be a film I wish to see."

"Very well, I shall accompany you."

"Of course, I can expect it to be your treat, correct?"

"Of course. It will be my treat."

"After the film, I wish to go shopping for clothes. Though of course, I wouldn't ask you to pay for those too."

"...Very well, I shall accompany you for that as well," answered Kai after some hesitation. Frankly, shopping trips for girls are boring to boys. Boring enough that Kai would try to dodge the situation even if it were Jun he was shopping with. Still, this was to show his appreciation for Kotobuki's help, so he figured it was best to tag along without making a fuss.

"Of course, I can expect you to select my purchases, correct?"

"Is that enough of a given to warrant being predicated by an 'of course'?!"

"I jest. Still, I would like to have a boy to provide a second opinion."

"Very well. However, I suggest you don't place much stock in my fashion sense."

"I'm excited nonetheless," said Kotobuki as she giggled deviously. But she wasn't done. "And last, I'd like to have a meal once we finish shopping." She pulled up the website of the place she had in mind on her smartphone and showed it to Kai. It was, er, quite the fancy-pants Italian restaurant. It might have been labeled "casual dining," but it still seemed a tad ritzy for high schoolers.

"...They seem like they'd command a high price."

"Splitting the check would be perfectly acceptable."

"In that case, very well, I shall accompany you. To show my appreciation."

"I'm growing ever more excited," said Kotobuki, giggling again. But this time, she seemed genuinely happy. As he gazed at his coworker's lovely smile, Kai pieced together what exactly he had just agreed to.

*The two of us are going to see a movie, then I'm helping Kotobuki pick out clothes, then we're getting dinner at a snazzy restaurant...*

He realized.

"...Does this not sound a bit like a date?"

"Would it present any problem if it were?"

"Um."

Kai was taken aback by this unexpected answer.

"Would it present any problem if it were a date?" repeated Kotobuki. Her attitude and expression were devilish, daring Kai to say no. But of course, it was just an act. She had the emotional stability of a wet paper bag, as evidenced by the comical extent to which her eyes were shifting around. Her shoulders were shivering so much as she waited for his answer that he just felt bad for her. She was probably trying to hide it, but she sure wasn't doing a great job. Kai couldn't avoid the truth if he tried; she wasn't joking

or teasing here. She was dead serious.

“N-N-N-No way,” asked Kai, his stammers coming out almost as a shriek.  
“Do you actually like me?!”

“Um, well, er, you see... yes.”

Kai’s face was stuck in an unnatural, statue-esque smile as he screamed internally.

*Even though we’re just coworkers?!*

## Afterword

**If the friend I played video games with every day were a cute girl, that'd be like the cutest thing ever.**

It took me until my teenage years to reach this ultimate truth.

Nice to meet you, everyone, unless it's nice to see you again. I'm Akamitsu Awamura. Thank you for taking the time to read *She's the Cutest... But We're Just Friends!* I hope you enjoyed reading this "just friends" rom-com filled with flirty fun!

Now, it's time for me to give my thanks. First, thank you to the illustrator mmu, who gave form to the cutest girl friend I could imagine. My initial proposal for the cover's pose might have been nonsensical, but you still planned and completed an absolutely brilliant illustration for it. I have no shortage of apologies and thanks I'd like to give, so I'll just say that I truly appreciate everything you've done!

My editor, Myzo, you've always been a great help with your detailed advice. Even after hitting the ten-year anniversary of my debut, I still find myself constantly indebted to the help that the GA Bunko staff give me.

I received a lot of advice from my contemporary, Toru Toba. By all means, dear reader, feel free to blow the sales figures for *The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt (Hey, How About Treason?)* sky high.

And of course, to every single one of my readers who picked up this book. With a massive amount of love from Hiroshima, thank you very much!

I truly hope we'll be able to meet again in volume 2. Given the state of things these days, it's not gonna be funny if we don't, so I truly, *truly* hope...







Kai Nakamura

A second-year  
otaku. Pursues his  
hobbies with  
passion.

So Jun,  
what're we  
hunting for?

IF SHE'S NOT HIS **GIRLFRIEND**,  
THEN **ANYTHING GOES?!**

**CUTE X FRIEND =**  
**THE BEST OF BOTH**  
**WORLDS!**

Jun Miyakawa

A second-year  
normie. A girl who  
is Kai's friend.

Anything,  
as long as it's a  
Tempered Elder  
Dragon.







As your  
friend.

O-Okay  
then, with your  
permission, I'm  
going to touch  
your boobs.

If you like  
boobs so much,  
how about I let  
you touch mine?

Since we're  
friends.

THEY'RE NOT DATING, SO IT'S NO BIG DEAL... OR IS IT?!  
THIS FLIRTY FRIENDSHIP WILL TEST HIS FORTITUDE!



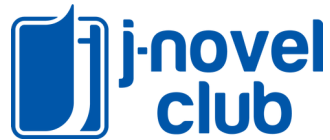




...Can I come closer?

...Sure.  
We're friends,  
after all.

*He can let his guard down.  
Because she's a true friend.*



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She's the Cutest... But We're Just Friends! Volume 1

Originally published as ORE NO ONNATOMODACHI GA SAIKO NI  
KAWAII. Vol. 1

by Akamitsu Awamura

Translated by Kristine Johnson and airco

Edited by Jennifer Sherman

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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Original Japanese edition published in 2020 by SB Creative Corp.

This English edition is published in arrangement with SB Creative Corp.,  
Tokyo

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Ebook edition 1.0: February 2021



